



# TAMING MONSTERS

BEAUTY AND HER MONSTERS  
BOOK ONE

VIOLET FOX

# *Taming Monsters*

BEAUTY AND HER MONSTERS



# VIOLET FOX



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# CHAPTER ONE

# Belle

I HOLD MY BREATH as I draw a string, lifting it up for the others to see.

Grady gasps, his watery blue eyes lingering on my string, and a wretched expression forms over his face. Derrick hangs his head, removing his hat in respect as Jacob clenches his jaw. Roger unscrews his flask, chugging back his whisky, and it's as if someone just sucked all the joy and merriment from the room.

It looks like I got the short string in the end, after all, the only female in our small ragtag hunting party. Go figure, hey.

*I will be the one to kill the monsters in the end: Isabel Hardgreaves of Shithole Town USA.*

They first appeared five years ago—shadowy creatures larger than life itself. No one knows where they came from: some say they are genetic experiments that went horribly wrong, while others claim they were humans that were infected by disease. Yet my theory is that they were here this whole time, creatures feeding on the very nightmares and fears of their most vital host: human beings.

My small-town lives under the shadow of an ominous, black castle, one owned by four vicious shadow beasts. They've lived there for five years now, erecting their great fortress from seemingly nowhere.

How they created a fortress from thin air is anyone's guess, but it just makes them all the more frightening in my people's eyes. These aren't mindless predators we are dealing with. They are intelligent, creatures that continuously progress by exploiting the fears of men, women, and children.

Each night they invade our dreams, their misery and hopelessness suffocating the land like a fog, and it's time we fought back.

We will end the monster scourge for good.

Grady sighs, placing a large hand on my shoulder, and his grief weighs me down. He's been like a second father to me ever since my own vanished six months ago, and he's clearly of two minds whether to let me go.

We're all in this together; we all agreed to make this as fair as possible.

Yet we are not equal. Far from it. Grady has a wife, children, and grandchildren. Derrick has an elderly mom, and Jacob, who's a few years older than me has a baby on the way.

And Roger has his teenage son.

I have no one. Before my dad went missing, it had just been the two of us in our small, rundown cottage at the edge of town—the crazy inventor and his eccentric, book-loving daughter.

I haven't read a book since Father went missing.

But it's fine. In a way, I knew it had to be me. I have to be the one to take this mission.

After all, my father went missing in the woods surrounding the monsters' castle, and I just know it was them who stole him away from me.

It's time to kill those bastards.

“Belle, it's okay. We can draw more strings...” Grady says, his tone soft and fatherly, and I squeeze my eyes, trying to stop the flow of tears.

I won't cry. I haven't cried since my father vanished, preferring to hide my emotions behind a perfect mask of calm.

Crying makes you weak and vulnerable; which, I have learned, is a sure-fire way to plaster a giant target on your head for the monsters.

Despite my hardy resolve, a shuddery breath escapes me when I meet Grady's sad, glittering eyes. He's a middle-aged man in his early fifties, yet he's strong. He's the rock of our small hunting party, and he taught me how to use a gun.

Then there's Derrick, a thirty-five-year-old with dark blond hair and glasses, and Jacob with his bright red hair and friendly, boyish features. Last but not least is Roger, a dark-haired man in his sixties with a permanent scowl etched on his face, but he's extremely loyal. Everyone can count on him.

I shake my head. “No, Grady. It *has* to be me. We all know it. Even if I didn't pull the short string, there's no one else more suitable. You all have families...”

Grady closes his eyes, his mouth pressing into a taut line as he tightens his grip on my shoulder. “I promised I would take care of you.

After your father vanished...”

I bow my head, hiding my face behind a long sheet of dark, shiny brown hair. “It’s fine. I know how to use a gun. You taught me, after all.”

The man nods, tears streaking his ruddy complexion, and it's all I can do to placate the man. We're not even sure if guns can kill a monster. There's no harm in trying, though, but we're dealing with supernatural beings here. Creatures created from human nightmares. Are they even corporeal?

Derrick removes his glasses, wiping tears from his own eyes. “Please don’t think we would ever sacrifice you, Belle. You mean a lot to us. We’re all one big family.”

He’s right. We're a pretty close-knit town. Sure, there are a few who gossip about me when they think I’m not listening, since I was always that weird, dreamy girl with her nose stuck in a book.

But not anymore.

As soon as Father vanished, I made myself useful and joined the hunting party, the only female member to have ever been recruited. I never got along with the other girls growing up, being the classic wallflower. As a matter of fact, they've always hated me since the town’s local heartthrob, Gustave, had his sights set on me.

He's handsome, all right, ridiculously so with his big square jaw and cleft chin. Don't forget the bulging biceps too, and the broad, hairy chest.

No thank you. Gustave is nothing but a caveman who thinks a woman’s place is at her husband’s feet, massaging his smelly toes by the fireplace.

Though primeval he may be, Gustave is the best huntsman in town. He never misses a shot, yet he never participates in any hunt. He hunts for sport only, and to show off for all the local ladies. His living room is full of mounted deer and moose, and he’s a narcissist to boot.

Jacob pipes up at last, a wide smile on his childlike face. He’s covered in freckles, hence why he looks so young. He’s twenty-five but could pass for sixteen. “You know we’ve always got your back right, Belle?”

I return his smile. No one can resist that friendly, boyish demeanor. Jacob will make a fantastic father. His wife, Nancy, still has a few months to go, and I hope the child inherits his red hair.

“I know, Jake. I can always count on the four of you...”

Silence trickles amongst our small party. We glance at Roger now, who has just finished slugging back his whisky. Grady rolls his eyes as he hates it when Roger drinks. I don't think I've ever seen Roger sober. He's regularly drunk out on our hunts, and through some stroke of luck, he always manages to come out unscathed. Even the time when he was almost mauled by a bear when we stepped too close to its territory, he survived, and I could do with just a small bout of that luck right now.

“Ah, pipe down, the lot of ya. It's like you're all forgetting who were dealing with. Belle's no fairy-tale damsel. She's got this. She can take down all four of those monsters in one shot.”

Well, that would be *four* shots, but thank you, Roger.

I glance at the drunken man, and despite myself, a smile springs over my face. “Thanks, Roger. You always know when to lighten the mood.”

Another bout of painful silence, and it seems we've all come to a collective agreement. I will be the one to kill the monsters. I will be the one to reclaim our small town.

They may only be four monsters amongst millions, but it's a start.

Humanity's counterattack against the monsters is about to begin.

Grady pulls me into a massive bear hug, squeezing the life force from my lungs, while Derrick and Jacob pat me on the back. Roger, however, offers me a swig of his potent whisky, and the moment the burning liquid spills down my throat, sending a buzz through my dormant veins, I'm raring to go.

*Thanks again, Roger.*

Slinging my rifle over my shoulder, I head out the door of our small hunting cabin, the others hot on my heels.

It's dawn when we tread through town. Mist swallows up the streets, hiding the faces of the townspeople who have all come out to bid me a silent farewell.

I know everyone's thinking it; it had to be me in the end. The others have families while I have no one.

But I know I am not alone. My men have got me, and they will always be my second family.

A familiar face appears, but I don't glance his way. He has pretty much pretended that I don't exist ever since I rejected him four years ago, and he's been pretty salty ever since. Yet no matter how many blonde triplets he flirts with, he will never make me jealous. Never make me change my mind.

I creep toward the edge of town, sucking in a sharp, cold breath. The mist seeps into my lungs, making me shiver all over, yet I maintain my focus on that distant castle, smirking to myself.

Time for the sheep to fight back against the wolves.



I squat in the bushes outside the castle, my eyes peeled on the highest window of the tallest tower. A shadow moves in the room beyond, and I tighten my hold on my rifle, hoping I can get a clean shot from here.

The room of the tower is aglow, almost making the castle appear dreamy and fairy-tale-like, but that couldn't be farther from the truth.

The home of the monsters is as black as their hearts. The hideous, gothic structure rises up fifty feet, swallowing up the night sky, but it's not like I could see the stars anyway.

The stars vanished the day the monsters arrived.

The gardens are shrouded by a tangle of thorns, which is going to make access difficult. Keeping my eyes on the tower, I move out from the bushes, staying in the shadows. At least that's one thing that has worked in my favor: the darkness. Since the monsters bring darkness wherever they go.

I make it to the outer wall. Just a few more feet and I will be within a stone's throw of the courtyard. Luckily, I'm small enough to slip through the gap in the gate, and if I'm really lucky, I won't get my ass stuck.

As I shuffle along the wall, a harrowing sound rents the air. I freeze. It's a howl, followed by two or three others, and a whimper escapes my lips.

Shit. I can feel those howls deep in the marrow of my bones, rattling me to my core.

What the hell was I thinking coming here? As if I could go up against four monsters. But it's too late now. If I go back to town, I will be deemed a coward.

No going back.

Drawing in another breath, I move along the wall again, coming to a stop outside the gate. The room in the tower is still alight, but the window has been propped open, and now I spy fancy purple drapes. They waft in the breeze, almost invitingly, and I shake my head, focusing on the task at hand.

The gate has small gaps. I am a dress size four. Well, I was the last time I shopped in a clothing store. I was seventeen, so I may have gained a few pounds.

Shoving my gun through the gate, I push my head in first and smile to myself. I've always had a small noggin', so I'm lucky in *that* department. Next, I drag my shoulders through, my waist, and finally, my ass.

It gets stuck.

My annoying bubble butt has betrayed me yet again, and I grind my teeth.

As I try to squeeze through the gate, cursing what my mother gave me, I wonder how it all came to this. Thwarted by a fancy, decorative gate. Never mind the monsters, this will be my undoing.

No, I refuse to lose like this.

So with one final push, I slip through the gate, landing in a pile of thorns on the other side. They prick my skin, and one even scratches my lower lip. My limbs seize the moment that red drop of blood trickles down my chin.

They say the monsters can smell the blood of their prey from a mile off, so now I yank my gun up off the ground, holding it ready.

I did it. I got inside the monsters' castle. I'm in their courtyard, protected from view by a large jungle of thorns.

All I need to do now is get through the thorns, and I will be at the beast's doorstep.

Grabbing my knife, I slash my way through the giant tangle, pretending I'm in an exotic jungle across the ocean.

Traveling is not an option for me. The monsters have caged us all, so this is the closest I will ever get to an adventure.

I always wanted adventure in the great wide somewhere, back when I was a little girl, back in the days when I used to lose myself in the pages of a book. But that all changed ever since the monsters arrived; even more so once Father vanished.

So I let go of that childish notion and face reality. There is no adventure or fantasy in this world. Only heartache and sorrow. My small counterattack against the monsters who took over my town may be a drop in the ocean, but it's a start.

I will quite happily be the spark that ignites the flames for humanity's revenge, so now I growl, hacking down branch after bothersome branch.

They shouldn't be in my way. Neither the thorns nor the monsters should be in the way of me living my best life, a life where I get to travel and see far-off places.

How hot is the sun in India? Are koalas as cute as they look in books? I will never know any of that because of these bastard monsters.

No one takes my town's freedom. No one takes mine.

The thorns begin to peter out the further I go, and I smile at my short, sweet victory. It looks like I made it through their forcefield.

Not very smart these monsters, are they?

Stepping out of the thorns, I crane my neck when I arrive at the doorstep of the castle, stowing my knife as I switch it for my gun.

This is it. Time to commence with this suicide mission. Maybe I will live to tell the tale, and I can go back to my town as a hero.

With shaking knees, I ascend the outer steps of the castle, stopping before a large bolted door. The bronze handle has the face of a horned monster, and what do I do? Knock?

I shouldn't really be out in the open like this. I should try finding a way in through a window, but instead, my gaze is fixed on the door knocker.

It's like it's beckoning me inside, its eyes glowing bright red, pulling me into a trancelike state, and now I reach my hand across.

Before my fingers make contact, the door opens of its own accord, and its loud creak rips me out of my trance.

Hoisting my gun up, I aim it at the door, expecting to see the face of a snarling horned man.

I slip inside, careful not to open the door any wider with my big butt, and before I know it, I'm inside the home of the monsters.

My chin drops to the floor once I see all the extravagance. While the castle looks black and rotten on the outside, it's furnished and decorated to perfection on the inside. There's a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, thick, red carpets and paintings galore, and a roaring fireplace in the front parlor.

I tighten my hands around the gun, turning my knuckles bone white. So, this is how they live, while we humans have to live in shantytowns across the US. My father's cottage is cold and smells of mold, and it rains through the ceiling.

But these monsters get to have a chaise lounge in their parlor, and pretty little knick-knacks like an intricately designed candelabra, one I am *sure* is staring at me.



By the armchair, the one next to the roaring fireplace, awaits a fancy tea set. I stifle a snort. So, monsters drink tea? How do their claws hold the dainty handles of those china cups?

I wander over to the tea set and pick up a cup. It has a chip on the golden rim. It looks like the tea set my grandmother used to keep in her cupboard.

The pot is still warm, yet no one is around. Although I can sense a presence, the castle appears to be empty, and what gives?

Who invited me inside?

Maybe it was the creepy-looking decor, which I am *sure* is alive.

Despite my better judgment, I fall down into the armchair, enjoying the heat from the fireplace. It sure is cozy in here. Much better than outside, and I almost forget why I came.

It's as if I am under a spell as I reach across, pouring myself a cup of rich brown-colored tea from the pot, lifting it to my bloodied lips. The tea touches my soul, and it tastes like pure heaven.

Why did I come here again?

As I sip my tea, tipping my head back against the headrest of the chair, a hot gulf of air wafts the back of my neck.

The moment I turn, I come face to face with the vivid green eyes of a black shadow and scramble out of the chair. The teacup thuds against the carpeted floor as I shuffle into a corner, trying to get as far away as I can from the beast.

It's like it's there but isn't. A seven-foot man made entirely of shadow as it looms closer, stretching its wings.

I'm going to die.

The gun. I still have the gun.

Flipping my rifle around, I pull on the trigger just as the shadow lunges. A bang goes off, and then everything turns black as the beast swallows me up in its giant maw.

I never had a chance.

The monsters have won yet again.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Grey

THE BULLET SHOOTS STRAIGHT through my incorporeal form, and I grunt in irritation. It's nothing more than an insignificant pinch, yet I'm still going to teach the little bitch a lesson.

Extending a smokey tendril, I yank a hold of her gun, watching as her wide, hazel eyes expand the moment I twist the barrel toward the ceiling. Good luck trying to shoot me with a bent rifle now, bitch.

She probably has a name, but who cares? They're all the same, and one day we will exterminate her kind from existence. They're a plague on this planet, and I don't care what Enzo says; we can survive without them.

Their emotions are our primary food source, but I believe we can achieve complete autonomy if we wiped them all from the face of the earth.

Then we will be entirely free.

Humans have had various names for our kind throughout the ages, from bogeymen, boggarts, bugbears, wraiths; but we are beings who feed on raw human emotion, and my favorite is fear.

Then there's greed, which is Enzo's, lust, which Madoc prefers, and finally, envy, which is Nero's favorite.

The emotions dripping from the human woman right now taste fucking amazing, and my mouth salivates as I wrap my tendrils around her body, peering into her mind.

What does she fear the most?

I bury deep into her essence, digging my claws inside her inner core, and there it is.

Holy shit. It looks like the thing she fears the most in this world is failure. A little abstract. I was hoping for something more tangible like spiders, but it will do. It seems she's complex, but I can work with that.

I present her all her past failures, and the woman writhes as I sink deeper and deeper into her memories, finding what makes her tick.

Damn, she does taste good. The best meal I've had in years as I lick my lips.

There was the time she got an F on a school report, and another where she failed to hand in a book on time at the local library; the anxiety she feels over that last one is just too much.

These are just superficial fears. I need to see what really gets her ticker going.

Deeper and deeper I go until I finally find what she's truly afraid of; losing everyone she loves. She's afraid she will never find her father again, and she's afraid that all her friends in the town will die.

All just because she failed today.

"N-no..." she cries.

My mouth stretches, exposing all my thin, pointed teeth. This is the moment I love the most. When they completely fall apart and surrender to my will, becoming nothing but a husk.

"Should have thought twice before you came sneaking around our castle. Come to sneak a peek at the beasts, did you?"

One hazel eye opens at that remark, and now I gaze into that blazing orb. She grits her pretty, porcelain teeth, and it looks like we have a feisty one here. Good. The feisty ones always taste the best.

"I'm not afraid of you, monster. I'll beat you. We all will..."

A ghostly chill falls over the room at the sound of the woman's voice, and I show her all my teeth. I extend my tongue, making her flinch when I lick her cheek, and I get a taste of that raw bravery, the best goddamn flavor that I've had in years.

Fuck. I need more.

I'm going to suck the bravery from her every vein.

I drag her away from the parlor kicking and screaming, heading down to the dungeons where she can think about all her mistakes. Her first: thinking that she could take out four monsters with lead alone, and two: daring to be so bold and talking back to me.

My kind doesn't tend to like brave humans. They confuse us. They're rare in this day and age, but every now and then we do find one, and before we know it we can no longer scare a six-year-old child anymore.

Oh, they're still afraid, but it's masked by a shiny veneer of courage, and I won't stand for it.

The woman is a threat to us.

"Let me go!" she screams, trying to wriggle free of my arms, but she's no match for my strength. No human is.

"No. It's time to teach you a lesson, human. Off to the dungeons you go."

She spews all kinds of expletives, and I refrain from chuckling. Not very ladylike, is she? Especially for one so... what's the word? Aesthetically pleasing.

Humans taste all the same to us monsters, whether they're ugly or beautiful, but I won't deny that there is something addictive about the ephemeral beauty of a human female.

I've never exploited the sexual desires of a human. That's Madoc's thing, but I can't help but wonder what kinds of sounds she would make if I buried my tendrils deep in the apex of her thighs, discovering that lovely wet pussy.

Shaking the thought aside, I kick the bolted door that leads to the underground dungeons and find her a suitable cell. There are chains hanging on the wall, and my dick reacts when I envision chaining her up naked.

No, her clothes stay on. Clothes that are a little wanting of some TLC, but who am I to judge? She wears a pair of washed-out denim jeans, a tank top that's way too small for her large breasts, and kickass leather boots.

I guess I shouldn't be too harsh. Humans no longer have access to the finer things in life. Something we stripped them of the day we rose up from the shadows and took over.

It's not that we had a choice. We were banished from the Abyss, and thus we are destined to walk this plague-ridden realm for all eternity.

Despite my reluctance before, I chain her up and step back to enjoy the blazing look in her beautiful eyes.

That truly is a beautiful face: heart-shaped, porcelain with wide dazzling eyes. Also, she has a pair of plump, kissable lips. I want to bite the plump skin of her lower lip and taste her blood.

No. No kissing, and no tasting her blood.

That would be uncouth of me: as Nero would say.

Her chest heaves, and now those big breasts pull at the thin material of her shirt, desperate to escape. I spy a pair of hardened nipples, and it looks like she's getting off to my chaining her to the wall.

I will never understand these humans. Especially the women.

"I swear," she breathes, those large, hazel eyes never leaving me. "You will all go down. More will come, and we will finally discover your weakness!"

Not that she can see my face, given that it's covered in shadow, but I hike up a brow. Does she truly believe that feeble threat can scare me? A creature who feeds off her fear?

"Whatever you say, sunshine."

Finally, I slip out the cell, slotting the bolt in place, and now I leave her alone in the dark, kicking and screaming about how the end is nigh for all monster kind.

So pitiful.

## CHAPTER THREE

## *Belle*

**M**Y MOUTH IS AS dry as the Sahara desert as I hang from my chains, my body limp and lifeless.

They got the best of me in the end. Those goddam monsters.

It's been hours since that big, shadowy brute dragged me down screaming into the dungeons like a banshee, and now all I can focus on is the pounding migraine in my skull.

What did that monster do to me? He showed me all my failures, past, present, and future, and what a Grade A asshole he is. Truly.

I can't wait to extinguish him from existence.

It looks as if bullets won't kill them after all. My shot went straight through his misty form, and now he's probably sitting upstairs somewhere laughing about me with his buddies.

Also, he chained my arms too tight. I'm losing circulation in my wrists.

How long do they plan on keeping me here? What will they do with me?

Shit. What if I'm on their menu tonight? I can see myself now, laid bare on a silver platter on their fancy, mahogany dining table. Will they truss me up like a turkey? Stick an apple in my mouth? Will they eat me whole or take smaller, indulgent bites?

It's not my flesh they will feed on specifically, but my fears, and now a cold sweat breaks out across my forehead.

That's not the only place I'm sweating, though. I envision myself lying helpless on their dining room table, my nipples hardening in the breeze while they feast their monstrous eyes all over me.

Beads of moisture gather on the skin beneath my nose, a tell-tale sign of arousal, and I won't let myself succumb to their dark wiles.



I've heard stories about monsters luring women, exploiting their deepest, most wanton desires, and I can't fall prey to such creatures.

I felt it when that monster chained me to the wall earlier, his emerald eyes dark and penetrating as they severed my flesh, and sure enough, the pointer sisters pop out to say "hi".

Sweat mustaches and rock-hard nipples aside, I can't be aroused by monsters.

It makes no sense. How can a monster be... sexy? For one, I couldn't even see the beast's true form; he was covered in shadow. But when I think about what he would do to my body, those long, oily black limbs probing deep between my thighs, I shudder.

Light flickers in the corners of my eyes, and I can't go on like this. I need to conserve all the bodily fluids that I can. I'm already thirsty, and it won't be long before I die of dehydration.

Curse those monsters.

Holding my head back, I shut my eyes, my mind wandering to Grady and the others. What are they all doing right now? Are they worried about me? Do they think I'm dead? Are they holding a silent vigil for me in town, the brave daughter of the wacky scientist who went missing six months ago?

Gustave will give a sermon, and I roll my eyes when I envision the bullshit spewing from his perfect lips.

Despite wanting me, he hated me because I always made him feel stupid and undesirable. Most women swoon and laugh at his dumb jokes, and it baffles his mind how I can still be so immune to his charms.

While the cleft of his chin could have its own zip code, I will never be tempted by such a pig. A handsome face will always age, yet a beautiful soul will always be evergreen.

A door creaks open in the dungeons, and I open my eyes, searching the shadowy corridor outside of my cell.

Flames flicker in sconces along the walls, adding to the gloomy, bleak atmosphere, and I'm never going to see the light of day again. I imagine they plan to keep me alive, just enough for them to feed on my emotions. I'll become a husk in no time—a zombie without a personality.

Footsteps echo down the corridor, and how do their feet produce sound when they're not corporal? I have no idea what substance they're made of. Their shadows seem to surpass the darkness of the night itself, and a familiar sweat beaks out across my skin again.

It's caused by fear this time.

Swallowing as hard as I can, I let the saliva travel down my throat, lifting my head high so I can face the monster.

Show that I'm not afraid of them.

I'm Belle, after all, the courageous, adventurous maiden from the village, and I'm no damsel in distress.

Finally, a figure materializes before the bars of the cell, and I look into those blazing orange eyes, shrinking in my chains.

Fuck. He's even worse than the last one, standing several inches taller, and he's wearing an ascot. Odd.

He's finely dressed for a monster, wearing a three-piece suit as he leans on a cane, but I won't be fooled. I know it's just a ploy to lull me into a false sense of security.

He's no gentleman.

I never got a proper look at the last monster's attire, but between the outfit before me and the way the castle is decorated, it's just struck me that these beings are pretty civilized for creatures so brutish.

I'd thought they'd be more animal-like, inhuman. They should be walking around stark naked, giant dicks on full display for my prying eyes.

Why does that thought delight me?

Their human-like mannerisms give me a greater incentive to fear them. These creatures are intelligent and mindful of what they're doing to us, and it terrifies me to my core.

The beast cocks its head to the side, appearing to assess whether I am good enough to eat, I bet. I try to ignore the thumping between my thighs at the idea of him taking a bite from my breasts.

This one has large horns growing from the side of its head, though they don't appear to be made from anything material. They're like the rest of his body, billowing columns of smoke that stretch toward the ceiling, and I gulp.

His orange eyes track the movement down my throat, and now they stop to linger on my breasts. My nipples betray me yet again, cutting through the flimsy material of my tank top and bra, and I can't take it anymore.

I have to get out of here. I have to escape.

A low rumbling reaches my ears, and it takes me a moment to realize where it's coming from.

It's coming from the beast, and a burning thread of desire connects my clitoris to my breasts, spreading a humming sensation throughout my body.

I can feel the thrum all the way to the roots of my teeth, and I swear my atoms are being torn from my very being.

What's come over me?

Finally, my pussy betrays me when my panties dampen with slick, and now I slump against the wall, the cell spinning in circles as I try to get my bearings.

Every inch of my skin is soaked with sweat as I pant for breath, and I just know that the monster is enjoying the sight of my suffering. Again, his eyes rake up and down my form, lingering on all the best parts of me, and I grind my teeth.

"Enjoying the show?" I hiss, gasping for air.

My voice is a thin rasp due to my dehydration, but the monster cocks his head the other way, and why do I find that expression so endearing?

It must be the horns. They're like the ears of a dog, swishing back and forth whenever he moves his head.

"You're not at all like the other humans, are you?" he intones, his voice deep and resonant, and once again it gives me a physical reaction.

I pinch my eyes shut, trying to stop the sensations that spread through my body, and I will not succumb, will not yield.

He keeps staring, his eyes dipping to my lips, and they tingle under his heated gaze. I'm tempted to lick my tongue across the plump flesh, but I don't want to give the monster another reason to leer at me.

So I close my eyes, breathing more words into the gloom. "You've... n-no idea... b-beast..."

Why is it so goddamn hot in this cell? My vision is swirling, and what's he doing to me? Is this another of their tricks?

As if they've got a mind of their own, my breasts push forward, and I'm no match for this monster.

Finally, he lifts a jangle of keys, slotting one inside the lock, and my heart thumps against my ribs when he ducks inside the cell.

I have nowhere to run as he looms above me, a giant black cloud of a monster, and I'm truly helpless.

He extends a clawed finger, placing it beneath my chin so he can get a better look at my face, and my heart punches a hole through my chest.

"You're frightened," he remarks, his tone nonchalant, and I refrain from rolling my eyes.

No shit, Sherlock. You're a giant shadow of a man with horns like Satan.

Still, I lie. “No, I’m not.”

“Don’t lie to me, little bell. Your heart is pounding. I can hear it.”

Little bell? How did he know my name? Unless he means a ringing bell?

Keeping a claw beneath my chin, he uses another one to caress my face, tracing the shape of my lips, and his touch is surprisingly gentle.

Whereas the monster from earlier was rough with me, this one has all the grace of a gentleman, and I’m not sure what to make of his contradictory behavior. He looks and sounds like a beast, yet he’s genteel.

Carefully, he brushes his claw beneath my nose, wiping away the sweat, and a shiver runs up my spine at his intimate touch.

“Sweating beneath the nose is an indication of fear in most humans... as well as arousal.”

My eyes snap open, and I glare up into his shadowy face. “What?”

A sigh wafts from his unseen mouth, and now he releases my hands from the cuffs, setting me free.

I try to get some blood flow back into my wrists as he sweeps out of the cell, ordering me to follow him, but I linger for a moment, wondering how far I would get if I ran.

Probably to the door.

“Well, are you coming, little bell? I think there is someone you would like to see.”

My head jerks up at that comment, and my curiosity finally gets the better of me as I follow the monster out of the cell.

We descend into a darker part of the dungeons, and I can only imagine what horrors await me down here. Will they torture me? It’s not worth thinking about because my body will only betray me yet again.

Finally, we stop at another cell. The monster inclines his head toward the bars, and I step forward, dreading what I may find inside.

When I peer through the bars, a pale shape takes form. It’s hard to distinguish at first, but there’s no denying the shape’s wispy white hair and tattered lab coat.

My heart leaps to my throat. “Father.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

“B ELLE!” THE OLD HUMAN male croaks from a dry throat, dragging his body toward her.

I glance at the human woman again.

Belle? So, that’s her name. I only named her *bell* for the pealing sound of her voice, but I never would have thought that it was her actual name.

French for beautiful, and she truly is as beautiful as I’d hoped.

Could she possibly be the one? The one destined to break the curse and send us back to the Abyss? We were once its four rulers, but then an evil enchantress banished us to the human world, forbidding us from ever returning. She came before us in the form of a withered crone, seeking our love and shelter. But when we refused to offer her what she most desired, she transformed before our very eyes, casting a curse upon us all.

If we ever want to return home, then we must seek the love and affection of a human woman, and not just any woman either. But a stubborn, headstrong woman who hates our kind.

We were just as stubborn that day when we refused the enchantress, laughing her out of our throne room in front of our entire court, and this is how we are paying the price for our mistreatment of her.

Belle truly is a stubborn one; I can tell. And intelligent, too. That’s the thing with wide, expressive eyes; they act as windows to the human’s soul, showcasing all of their private thoughts and emotions, and Belle is no exception.

I can see her entire essence inside those round, hazel eyes, and I knew from the moment that I peered inside them that she is different. The one to return me and my brothers to the throne...

My mate.

As delicious as humans are, there truly is no place like home. No matter how many storm clouds we create in *this* world, we can never achieve the same level of darkness that can be found in the Abyss.

I'd do anything to go back. This world is simply too cheery for me, and that's saying something since the human world has plunged into darkness ever since we arrived.

The moment Grey told me that he locked a female intruder down in the dungeons, I had to see for myself.

If there is just the smallest chance that we can return to our thrones, I will take it in a heartbeat. Consequences be damned.

It was only a matter of time until someone came for old Monty, anyway, and it looks as if his savior has come in the form of his young, beautiful daughter at last. I was already aware that he had a daughter, and if you listened hard enough, you could hear the whole town whispering about her.

She truly is lovely: big, soft eyes, porcelain skin, and pouty lips. I couldn't help myself before when I traced a claw around her perfect mouth. It was just *begging* for my touch, and I'd guessed right. They had been as soft as rose petals.

That sensual curve of her Cupid's bow will be forever etched into my memory, and one day I want those heart-shaped lips encircling my cock.

"Father... is that really you?" she cries, her voice pealing like a bell again, and it does something strange to my heart.

It's never done *that* before...

Monty reaches his cold fingers through the bars of the cell, and the two humans attempt an embrace. How sweet.

"Belle, you shouldn't have come here," Monty warns.

Belle lifts her head at her father's response, and those big doe eyes find me. The hatred that bleeds from her soft irises pricks at my cold, black heart, and what I'd do to make her look at me differently.

I only want to see love and lust in those hazel eyes; I swear to myself, I will make it happen. I will make her mine, and I *will* return home.

"Let him go."

Her voice is firm, yet there's no denying that melodic lilt, the one that rings like a perfect bell.

I puff out a deep exhale, hoping that she can understand my intent despite my expressionless face. Well, expressionless to her.

Humans are unable to see the faces of our kind. It's always been that way, ever since ancient times when we used to visit their realm and haunt their dreams.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, little bell. You see, your father trespassed onto our territory, and any male caught roaming our land is to be taken prisoner."

An adorable wrinkle forms between her brows, and it appears she's confused. "Male?"

Again, I sigh. "My kind are extremely territorial when it comes to males we don't know, monster or otherwise. We do not take kindly to threats."

She jumps to her feet, pointing a finger up at me as I watch her amused. "Threat? He's a sixty-nine-year-old man. He's hardly a threat! You're just a brute!"

Her silken voice becomes a shriek, and now the two of us gaze into each other's eyes, studying the other carefully.

Monty sobs behind us in his cell. "Belle, please... you must go..."

Belle blows out her own frustrated sigh. "I can't. Because I'm a prisoner just as much as you are."

That's where she's wrong. Grey was just being a little overzealous before. My kind has no problem with females. In fact, we welcome them into our abode. It's just that none have dared to be as fearless as Belle, and she truly is a little spitfire.

"No, you are not. As far as I'm concerned, you are free to go, little bell."

Just when I thought her eyes couldn't get any bigger, they almost encompass her whole face, and now they're all I can see. The light from the sconces really brings out the green of her hazel irises.

"W-what?" she gasps.

"You heard me, Belle. Now off you go. Back to that dreary little town that likes to gossip behind your back."

Belle's lip shakes, and she glances back at her father, a mist shining in her eyes.

Monty waves her away. "Well, what are you doing? Go! Before the beast changes his mind!"

Beast? Now, that's a little harsh.

A tear drops from Belle's eye, and I track its movement down her cheek. A weight presses down on my chest, and I have to glance away before I do something I'll regret.

I could live a thousand more moons before I ever had to see that teardrop again.

"I... I can't leave you, Father..."

Monty uses what little strength he has left, gripping onto the bars with feeble hands, and a determined light flashes through his watery blue eyes. "But you must! I'm old, Belle. I've lived my life. Yet you still have so much to live for."



She sobs, and the pressure continues on my chest. What *is* this? Normally, my kind feeds off these kinds of emotions, but hers are weighing me down like a sack of rocks, and I have to get away.

Belle shakes her head, glancing my way again, and those hazel eyes vanish behind a veil of tears. “T-take me instead.”

Monty cries out in dismay. “Belle, no!”

She doesn’t look away from me, and I can see that her mind is already set. I loom closer until my face hovers inches from hers, and she doesn’t even flinch. “You would take his place as prisoner?”

She breaths in, clearly determined. “Yes.”

Again, I study the vivid green of her eyes, and it appears she really has made up her mind.

Rising to my full height, I open up the cell, yanking the old man out by the scruff. He squirms in my grip, trying to get to his daughter, but he’s no match for my otherworldly strength.

Belle takes his place in the cell. I lock the door behind her as I drag her father away from her forever, and I can’t believe what I’ve just witnessed.

A young woman sacrificed herself for her elderly father, and these humans will never cease to surprise me.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## *Belle*

I'M NOT SURE HOW much time has passed as I crouch in the corner of my new cell, my cheeks stained with tears.

Has Father already made it back home? I bet he's back at our cottage already where he's free from pain and suffering.

I don't regret my decision; I know I made the right choice. He's all the family I have left. He may be getting on in years, but he still deserves to spend what time he has left in comfort.

It's okay. We will be reunited again. I will escape these beasts, and kill each one of them. Just as I promised Grady and the others from the moment I drew the small string.

I know Grady will be taking care of my father now, and I'm glad those old friends can be together again.

A door opens at the end of the gloomy corridor, and I wipe my face, removing all evidence of my weakness.

I will not show any vulnerability in front of these creatures. They will use it as a weapon against me, and make me do their bidding.

Soon the ominous black shadow of the well-dressed monster appears before me yet again, and this time he has company.

It's the green-eyed monster again. The one who dragged me down to the dungeons in the first place, and I gnash my teeth.

He took it upon himself to lock me down here, even though the horned one said that as a female, I am free.

Apparently, they only deem males a threat, and how ridiculous. I'm more of a threat to them than my seventy year old father ever was, and it shows just how much they know.

They probably think I'm just your average damsel in distress. A woman waiting to be rescued by a prince or a gallant knight, and screw that sentiment.

I don't need to be rescued, and I don't need some handsome prince. I knew a handsome guy, and honestly? Looks are so overrated.

The winged monster chuckles, his green eyes narrowing to slits as he stares down at me, and the impression reminds me of a sly cat.

"You weren't lying, big bro. So, the broad *did* take the place of her father..."

I jump to my feet, running at the bars of the cell, and the rust from the iron stains my fingers. But I don't care. He dare laugh at me; he dare call me broad?

"Shut up! A monster like you would never understand. You've probably never loved anything in your life!"

The winged monster growls, and it sends a prickle down the sides of my ribs. Next, he slips a tendril through the bars of the cell, wrapping it around my throat. I'm lifted several feet off the ground, and the only thing I can see are those glowing eyes of emerald.

A half-moon smile stretches across his void of a face, and now I spy a set of serrated, shark-like teeth, breaking out in a cold sweat.

This is how I will die.

His wings flap behind him, blowing the hair from my face, and I tell myself that I'm not afraid; that I can take anything that these monsters throw at me.

"I don't need to love. I can just steal it from you. It seeps out of your pores, after all, along with your delicious *fear*. Oh, and don't forget the shame and guilt too. It looks like you failed after all, sunshine, and now you are our prisoner. I'm going to have fun with you."

His cruel chuckle reverberates through my spine, and I try to pull free of his grip, but my fingers only go through his tendril.

How can he touch me with his shadowy limb, yet I can't touch him? Just something else that I will never understand about these monsters. But I don't care about understanding them. I just want to eradicate them from existence, and bring light back to the world.

"Grey, let the human go," the horned monster orders, and I open my eyes just a sliver.

Grey? So, he has a name. A snort spurts from my throat, and Grey glowers down at me. "What's so funny?"

"You... you can all pretend to be as civilized as you want, but neither of you are fooling anyone. You're just a pair of ravenous monsters. You have no ounce of humanity in you!"

Grey blinks at me, bewildered, as if he can't believe that I have the audacity to spew such nonsense. Then he yanks me toward the bars of the cell, squashing me against the rusted iron, and now his wide, snarling mouth is inches from my face. Saliva drips from those razor teeth, making my heart tremble, and I stare into that black cavern of a mouth.

“Humanity is overrated. Humans are nothing special, and besides... your kind is far more bloodthirsty than mine will ever be, sunshine.”

I don't look away from that cave of a mouth. I'm transfixed, unable to tear my eyes away from its sheer blackness, and what are they made of? Not even the empty vacuum of space could compare.

The horned monster steps closer, placing a hand on Grey's shoulder. “Grey... please drop the human. First impressions count after all.”

First impressions? I think that ship sailed long ago.

He chained me to a dungeon wall!

Grey drops me at last, muttering something unintelligible as I wrap my hand around my throat. Even though he applied no pressure to my neck, it still felt as if he was sucking the life from my lungs. That the only thing that kept me alive were those sharp teeth.

I've never seen anything so vicious. I've hunted several animals, and none of them came close to what I spied inside that black mouth.

The horned monster produces an exasperated sigh, and now he withdraws a key, slotting it inside the lock. He opens the door for me, and I stand there, gawking like an idiot.

Grey huffs. “What are you waiting for? An invitation? Get the fuck out!”

I step back, thinking I'd prefer to stay in my cell. “Where are you taking me?”

The horned monster peers down at me, his orange eyes careful and assessing as he regards me quietly. “Your room, of course.”

I gawp at him like an idiot. “My... room?”

Grey makes a sound of disgust. “Well, do you want to stay in the dungeon?”

Of course I don't, but I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing that. Instead, I hold my tongue, edging my way out of the cell.

The monsters turn on their heels. Well, their metaphorical heels. They don't appear to have any feet. They just walk upon a cloud of smoke, and do they possess any form at all?

My body gives an involuntary shiver. It just makes them all the more untrustworthy in my eyes. How can I trust a creature that doesn't even have a face?

We reach the upper level of the house, and we tread across the spacious foyer as we head for the stairs. I crane my neck, taking in the gold moldings of the ceiling.

This is the nicest house I have ever seen, and they must be filthy rich. They have all this extravagance, while many people across the world are living in slums like my village.

They took everything from us, and yet they dare to live in such comfort.

I swear. I will expunge them from existence. I will find a way to kill them, sending them back to whatever cold, damp abyss they came from.

“I can see you're admiring the gold moldings, little bell,” the horned monster remarks, and I startle when I hear that deep, reverberating voice.

It reminds me of a church organ, vibrating through my entire being, and I have to take a moment to adjust. It was that voice that aroused me earlier, and those smoldering eyes.

I scoff. “No. Not exactly.”

The horned monster shrugs. “Well, it's as I say. If it isn't *baroque*, don't fix it.”

He chuckles to himself, and was that supposed to be a joke?

Even Grey glares at the other monster in irritation, and would you look at that. It appears we are of one mind. “You have never said that in your life.”

“I know,” the horned monster replies, laughing a little more, and I bet he's a hoot at parties.

Seriously, I need to get out of here.

“You may call me Enzo, Ms. Belle,” the horned monster says as we ascend an ornate set of marble stairs.

I don't reply, keeping my eyes on my boots.

Enzo continues. “Also, you will join me and my brothers for dinner later.”

Dinner? Where I will be on the menu, I bet.

Again, I envision myself trussed up like a turkey as Enzo, Grey, and his other two brothers nibble at my flesh, and the erotic images send my mind into a spiral.

Erotic? No. Any sane person would find that imagery all too distressing. It's nightmarish. Yet when I picture Grey wrapping his shark teeth around my breasts, splitting the taut flesh of my nipples with each of those fine pinpricks, a whimper escapes me.

Both monsters stop once we reach the second floor, and a tense quiet passes over the three of us. There's almost something predatory in their gleaming eyes as they watch me as silent as the wind, calculating their next move, and all I can do is freeze like a hare.

Shit. What do I do? Run in zigzags? Would that even work on them? They're made of shadow. Real-world physics don't apply to them.

No, I can't run. My only choice is to stick this through and try and survive. I will find my opening. I will escape this castle and all its residents.

I still have two more monsters to meet after all, and I bet they're even worse than these two.

Enzo seems to come back to himself, leading the way up the grand corridor again. Our footsteps are muffled by a red carpet, and I'm spellbound by all the filigree details.

I marvel at how much detail there is in this castle. Even the walls bare stone faces of gargoyles and other demonic lifeforms, and it's like the place is alive.

Finally, Enzo stops at a large ornate door, twisting the handle. He motions for me to step inside when he opens the door, and again, I hesitate.

I know it will beat the dungeon cell any day, but I'm still afraid of what I may find in there. After all, this could just be some cruel trick.

Grey loses his patience at last, and now he pushes me inside, slamming the door with a bang. I freeze, momentarily blinded by a wall of darkness. But then candles flicker to life all around me, and a soft light falls over the room.

I gaze at a large four-poster bed fit for a king. There's also a roaring fireplace and several plush chairs, and it appears that they had this room prepared for my arrival.

There's a red chaise by the fire, a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and more of that fancy gold molding. I really am living a fairy tale dream.

Except this isn't a fairy tale. This is the home of four ravenous monsters, and I am their prisoner.

I will never know a day of freedom again.

Well, so they think.

Fair enough. If I have to play the part of the damsel in order to survive, so be it.

I'll be their perfect little *Belle*.

## CHAPTER SIX



# Nero

I TAKE MY USUAL seat at the dining table, raising a brow when I spy a new plate setting on Enzo's right.

So, the human woman will be joining us for dinner. I bet the poor thing thinks she *is* the dinner as she hides up in her room, and who can blame her? My brothers and I are assholes. Grey especially.

At least Madoc won't be joining us. Enzo has locked him up in the East Wing Tower, and for good reason. That monster is *unhinged*. The moment he got a scent of the human woman, he lost all control, and then he went off on one of his 'zoomies' as we like to call them.

The bastard will shoot across the room like a streak of black smoke, making an epic mess as he goes, and then it's up to *me* to clean up after him.

It's not like anyone else will clean. I do all the cleaning in this place because I hate filth. Dirt is the real evil in this world.

My poor brother had pleaded with us as we chained him to the wall, and his exact words: "*Please... I'll... I'll be good! I won't eat the pretty human... too much!*"

His crazed cackle bounced off the walls after that proclamation, and it only cemented our decision further to keep him away from Belle.

Because if he escapes, there's no telling what he will do.

I sigh. Ever since we were banished from our world, he seems to have gotten worse. He was always on the *extra* side, but the last few years have been rough for all of us. Madoc used to be our general, in charge of all our armies and divisions. But now look at him, running around the room like a sheepdog on crack.

I think he just needs stimulation, or some sheep to herd. Our armies are all scattered now. We have no idea where our previous subjects are. Regrouping them had not been easy. The enchantress had

made absolute sure of that.

One day, we will banish that bitch back to whatever pit she crawled out from.

Grey sneers at me as I inspect the silverware for any smudges, making sure they are up to standard. I'd already steamed them earlier, but one can never be too careful.

“What the fuck are you doing? Checking out your ugly mug, baby brother?”

I drop the knife and regard him irritably. As our former strategist, I have a lot of respect for my winged brother. But in this world, he's just a douche.

“No. I'm looking for smudges. I'm pretty sure Madoc came down earlier and licked all the knives before we sent him up to the tower.”

Now that *would* be a Madoc thing to do. His tongue secretes a special fluid that's unique to him and him only, and it's how he marks his territory. Anything he licks becomes his, in essence, so really, we're eating with his forks and knives now.

It's his own personal retribution; he knew we were going to lock him up in the tower for his weekly 'timeout', and the woman's arrival only sped up the painful process. As I said, Madoc has not been himself since we were banished to the human world. While I do harbor a lot of sympathy for my brother, he's obviously going through some things. But does he have to be so... what's the word? Uncouth?

Grey ditches the silverware at my remark, and instead, he grabs the bowl with his claws and slurps up his food. I roll my eyes.

Why do I bother?

We can at least *try* to be civilized. We're monsters, not animals—even though we all have animal parts. Madoc has the lizard tongue, while Enzo got the bull horns. Grey has his batwings, and I have my glorious tail.

It's long and slender, like the tail of a cat, and it even has a few tufts of fur at the end like a lion's. Plus, it's prehensile.

Peering into my bright violet eyes once again, I finally switch the knife around and start cutting my steak. As I lift the bloodied meat to my lips, it comes to my attention that our human guest has yet to arrive.

Seriously? Where are our manners? We should have at least waited for her. Maybe we are animals after all.

It appears Enzo at least had the grace to wait. He sits reticent in his chair across from me, his hands neatly folded on his lap, and he has all the air and grace of an English nobleman.

Out of the four of us, he was the quickest to adopt human mannerisms and customs. I can confidently say that I have met humans far less civilized than he is these last few years.

Humans can be pretty vile.

“So,” I start, leaning back in my chair. “Will our *guest* be joining us soon?”

Enzo closes his amber eyes. “When she is ready.”

I glance down at my food, wondering how best to approach this. I don’t mean to sound impatient. “Well, should we check on her?”

“Fuck that!” Grey snaps, ripping a leg from the gargantuan turkey at the center of the table as he shoves it between his rows of needle teeth.

I brush my tongue across my own needle teeth then, grimacing when I discover that I have a *seed* stuck in the front row. I thought I got it out earlier.

Now that just won’t do. What will our new guest think of me when she sees that I have a *seed* stuck in my teeth?

She will definitely think I’m an otherworldly monster.

“Perhaps she’s afraid,” I hedge.

Enzo shrugs his shoulders at my proclamation. “Perhaps. We need to be delicate. Humans have a weak constitution after all.”

Still. We can’t wait forever, and neither can she. I’d heard about what she’d done, taking the place of her father, and the action moved me.

She must really love her old man if she was willing to take his place as prisoner, and a melancholy sigh blows from my lips.

If only I could find someone to love me like that; if only I could love someone like that.

I have considered that she may be the one to break the curse and send us back to the home from where we were banished, but I won’t take advantage of the human.

You can’t force feelings, after all, as I have learned. Been there and failed miserably. As beautiful as human women are, they are out of our reach.

Monsters like us don’t get the girl. We get slain by handsome princes and knights.

I finally make my decision, pushing my chair out behind me, and Enzo and Grey glance up at me. Another exasperated breath escapes my weary lungs. “I’ll go up and encourage her to join us.”

Enzo raises a brow. “You sure that is wise, brother?”

I meet those blazing orange orbs. “Probably not, but what other choice do we have? She can’t be afraid of us forever.”

“Tch, let her go and starve I say,” Grey chimes in sweetly, and I toss him a baleful look.

He really can be a monster at times.

Enzo nods his head, giving me his blessing, and now I float out of the room, taking a shortcut through the house.

It’s a special skill of mine; being able to move freely with ease. I was the spymaster of our old court for a reason. Even my own kind never suspected me, and I sniffed out a lot of traitors.

When you think you know a monster, but then they only end up stabbing you in the back later on down the line.

Lucky thing I’m so talented. No one crosses me and my brothers. As repugnant as they can be—sans Enzo—I’d die for them.

Also, merging with the shadows allows our bodies to travel faster, and I kind of want to see what I’m up against before I make myself known to her.

Enzo had said that she was a looker, and that I better prepare myself.

I may come across aloof, but I get weak at the knees at the sight of a beautiful woman. There’s just something about the ephemeral beauty of human females. It lasts only a short time, since humans age much faster than monsters, but maybe one day we can find a woman whose shining beauty is enough to even outlive the four of us.

A beautiful soul never ages, never dies...

I arrive at her allocated room, seeing that my brother gave her one of the larger suites, and I watch her from the shadows.

A little creepy, I know, but I never claimed to be a gentleman. That’s Enzo’s thing. I’m just the clean and fussy one—and don’t forget sneaky too.

I’m also what you would describe as “silently disturbed”. Madoc is more on the nose with his insanity, yet I hide mine beneath a polished veneer of calm. It’s how I’ve had to be. As the spymaster, if my enemies even so much as knew what I was thinking, then they would have caught me out years ago.

As a result, I’m frightfully stoic, and I may as well be made from ice.

The woman Belle has stripped her sheets bare as she sits on the bed with her back to me, and there I spy the delicate bones of her spine.

So easily breakable; she truly is a fragile thing. I bet I could crush her with my hands alone.

Maybe my brothers should chain me to the wall next to Madoc.

Even from the shadows, there's no missing that sweet scent of roses as it drips from her pores, and I bet she tastes as good as she smells.

My mouth salivates, and this just won't do. I have to get closer.

Creeping to the side of the bed, I watch as she ties her sheets into a knot, creating a way to escape most likely.

Out of the window, I presume. She wouldn't get very far. My brothers and I would find her eventually.

She pretty much made a deal with the devil, signing her life away so that her father could go free, and now she must live up to her end of the deal.

I study the profile of her face, and such a lovely thing she is. She has an upturned nose like an elf, full kissable lips, and fair skin.

I could stare at her pretty elfin face all day and night.

Belle stiffens suddenly, jerking her head toward my hiding place as she peers into the shadows, and the light from the candle reflects the green of her eyes.

My cardiac pump thumps to life, and what in the blazing hell? Did my heart just *start* again? I'm pretty sure that thing stopped beating years ago.

I've only seen eyes that big on the pages of a Japanese manga, and she truly does resemble a caricature. Surely, they don't make them this pretty anymore, right? She has to be some type of fae, especially with those elfin good looks.

"I... know you're there," she breathes. "Show yourself."

I sigh. While I may have the ability to become one with the shadows, I'm still easily detectable if you know what it is that you are looking for. And this woman has obviously trained her eyes.

There's something just so preternaturally *black* about the shadows of our bodies. Kind of like a splodge of oil left on tarmac, minus the pretty iridescent colors.

Finally, I materialize from the shadows, and Belle stumbles off the bed. I don't do or say anything as she goes through her process.

"Can... can you all do that?!" she points, her finger shaking, and how I want to take that hand and warm it between my palms.

My face betrays no emotion, but it's not as if she could tell anyway given that I'm nothing but shadow. Well, to her eyes. I can still see my brothers as clear as day, and my own face whenever I

gaze into a mirror.

“Do what?” I reply.

“Oh, I don’t know... sneak into my room?!”

Her sarcastic response amuses me, and I love a woman with a bit of snark. They didn’t come in this flavor a couple of hundred years ago. Women then held their tongues, letting their men do all the talking for them.

This one truly is spicy. I can already tell just by being in her presence that she’s one of those strong, independent types who don’t need a man, or however they put it.

She’s her own hero, her own shining knight on a white horse, but I don’t care; as independent and snarky as she is, I can still be her knight.

I’ll save her, even though she doesn’t want to be saved.

I think back to her question, getting too distracted, it seems. I guess we can all slip into the shadows. Enzo is far too polite, offering the woman her privacy, while Grey couldn’t give two shits about being her Peeping Tom, and Madoc is currently locked away in the East Wing.

“Yes, we can. Yet I can stop if it would make you feel better. But... where is the fun in that?”

I cringe at my pitiful attempts to flirt. I just do not have a silver tongue.

A small, raspy chuckle escapes my windpipe, but Belle wrinkles her nose, and if it wasn’t the most adorable expression I have ever seen.

I bet she has no idea how precious she is.

“Which one are you?” she asks, her voice firm and steady, but I can tell she’s at the end of her tether.

She’s slowly going insane inside that pretty head of hers, and honestly, that just makes her all the more alluring. Snarky and insane? Count me in.

“Are you asking me my name, Belle?”

She shivers when I address her by her moniker, and it looks as if it’s going to take her some time to adjust to her new life here.

“I’m Nero. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

I extend a long, black tendril, stretching it across the bed, and she stares at my incorporeal limb in dismay.

I don’t see what the big deal is. My tendril doesn’t bite.

She squeezes her eyes, shaking her head, then glares at me. “Why have you come here?”

I step closer, settling down on her bed, and she flinches. She may look and act afraid, but I know there's a minx in there somewhere.

She would love to feel my tendrils inside her.

"I came to fetch you. Dinner is ready, though it's most likely gone cold by now. You must be hungry after the day you had."

Belle makes a hacking sound in her throat, and does she have a hairball stuck in there? "Dinner with you? I'd rather burn alive!"

I don't give her a reaction. In fact, I expected it, but I know she's lying. I know she isn't completely horrified of us. She has a curious mind and body, and I know she's imagining what it would be like if I shoved one of my tendrils between her legs.

What kind of sounds would she make?

I can sense her arousal from where I'm sitting. It's almost palatable, resting on my tongue, and I steer my thoughts in another direction.

I won't go down that avenue again.

"Don't worry, darling. You're not on the menu. At least not tonight."

Her eyes widen, and she staggers back, pressing her spine to the wall. Her chest heaves, drawing my focus to her large breasts, and her nipples poke through the cotton of her shirt.

That tank top really leaves little to the imagination.

Finally, I rise, heading out the door. "There are some clothes in the closet. I'll wait outside while you dress."

Her eyes dart toward the closet, and I bet she's worried that I will spy on her while she's getting dressed.

I won't deny that the idea thrills me, but I will offer her privacy. The poor thing has been through enough.

I guess I can be a gentleman after all.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



## Belle

THE VELVET PINK DRESS that I found inside the closet isn't the most flattering thing I've worn, but it beats the old tank top and jeans. Plus, it has so many ruffles, it hides my hunting boots, which aren't so feminine, I'm afraid.

I'd been wearing those clothes for a while, so it was about time for a change. I haven't bought any new clothes since I was seventeen.

I haven't worn a *dress* since I was seventeen. Ever since the monsters took over, I had to toughen up and abandon my femininity, but it's not that I have anything against pink per se. Blue was just always *my* color.

I used to wear a blue satin ribbon all the time.

Blue had been my mom's favorite color back when she was alive, and it was also the color of her eyes. Now all I wear are combat pants and jeans, and whatever else I can find during a raid.

A lot of towns and cities have been abandoned, leaving behind a number of clothing stores, and they've been left in pretty good condition.

You can't shoplift anymore if there aren't any more rules to abide by. Not that I ever would have stolen anything back when the world was still normal, but anything I find during a raid is free for the taking.

It's about survival. That's all we have now, and I can't afford to feel guilty. It's the same when I take a buck out with my gun. I need to eat.

I used to be a stout vegetarian too, but not anymore. The monsters have made it near impossible to grow anything, making the land so cold and desolate, and it's a miracle that humans and deer have even survived for so long.

Now creatures of darkness reside in our forests, animals that the monsters brought from their realm, and we really were no match in the end.

I peer down at my reflection in the full-length mirror, wondering if I should do anything with my hair. It looks like a rat's nest. Also, it's dull and has lost its shine.

Grabbing a comb from the vanity, I start teasing it through my chocolate brown tresses, and before long I've eradicated that rat's nest of a mane.

Curiously, I open a drawer on the vanity, surprised when I find a pile of ribbons. Someone's certainly an avid collector. I wonder who it was. Nero? Enzo? Does Grey like dressing his hair in pretty pink ribbons?

I stifle a snort. I don't even know if he has hair since his features are still a mystery to me, and now I grab a cornflower blue satin ribbon, tying my hair back in a low ponytail.

It will do, I suppose. I've just missed wearing ribbons. Maybe they will let me hold onto it for a while. It's like I'm reclaiming a bit of the old me again; the girl who used to spend countless hours perusing the titles of her local library. Then when she found herself a book to read, she would disappear to her favorite nook, and not come home until teatime.

Mom used to get pissed at me, yet Dad was always too busy coming up with new inventions down in the basement, but they were good times. I miss them.

I miss my parents.

That old library is gone now. All the books had to be used for tinder.

Heading downstairs, I stop at the door, taking several deep breaths. I can do this. I can face my demons.

Time to have dinner with the devil. Or *four* devils.

Opening the door, I pause to find Nero on the other side, leaning against the wall, and his violet eyes widen in pleasant surprise when he gets a look at me.

“You look... *pink*.”

I glare at him, and a handsome chuckle reverberates deep in his chest as he leads the way down to the dining hall, and he's such a rude pig.

He could have at least tried to come up with a better compliment.

We arrive at the dining hall, and my stomach rumbles when I smell all that glorious food. My mouth fills with saliva.

I groan in pleasure, and all three monsters stop and stare once the sound leaves my lips. A quiet settles over the room, and I need to watch myself around these beasts.

Unless I want to end up being served on a silver platter at the center of the table, I best keep my noises to myself.

I never meant for the sound to be so sexual. I just haven't seen so much food in a while.

How the other half lives. That other half being *monsters*, of course.

Enzo rises, directing his hand toward a seat beside him, and is he *kidding* me? He wants me to sit kitty-corner to him?

No thank you.

"Belle... I'm so glad you could join us."

I glance around the table. Grey gobbles on a turkey leg, his eyes sharp and fierce as he dares me to challenge his messy eating habits, and that's when I spy the fourth seat.

"Wait... I thought there were *four* of you?"

Grey almost chokes on his turkey, and it appears a bone went down the wrong pipe hole. Nero freezes on my right, almost becoming as still as a statue, and Enzo merely sighs.

"There are. But unfortunately, our brother couldn't join us..."

I don't even know why I care; I don't even know why I bother to ask since it's just one less monster for me to worry about, but I suppose it would be nice to see who I'm up against.

I want my enemies in plain sight at all times.

"But... why?" I ask.

"He's batshit fucking crazy, that's why," Grey pipes up. "The moment he caught a whiff of you, sunshine, we had to lock him up. So, if you like being *alive*, I wouldn't go near the East Wing."

He explodes into a fit of raucous laughter, and I hope he's joking.

Grey continues his heartless tirade. "It's a shame too. He's normally quite... *hinged*. Well, most of the time. It appears you bring nothing but trouble wherever you go, human."

Well, *I'm sorry*. It's not like I asked to be taken hostage. Well, I did sneak into their home, but I had no choice.

I had to protect my dad and ensure his safety. I hope he's having tea with Grady now.

Seeing that I have no choice, I take my seat beside Enzo, my eyes growing bigger than my belly as I stare at all that food.

Food, glorious food. I bet this is how kings eat.

Does that make me a queen?

I shake my head, removing that preposterous thought from my mind, and peer up and down the table. Enzo grabs a ladle from a bowl in the center and starts filling up my soup bowl, and the smell of garlic travels to my nose.

Garlic. I haven't eaten that in years.

Pure heaven.

I just wonder who cooks their food. A human slave, I bet.

"Here, start with the soup and work your way up. You must be—"

The horned monster doesn't get to finish as I start slurping up my soup, and when I'm done, I lick the bowl, making sure I get every last drop.

Oh, my God. It's like sex in my mouth! Not that I've been having any sex lately.

All sound is sucked from the room, and I finally open my eyes. All three of them look at me as if I'm a rare museum specimen, and I shrink in my seat, becoming as red as a lobster.

This must be how cornered prey feels, and I suddenly feel bad for all the deer I've hunted over the years.

Grey's the first to break the silence, bursting out in harsh laughter, and I can always count on him to break the ice. The jackass.

Nero has a wry smirk on his face. Well, at least I think he does. Even though they are obscured by shadow, their eyes are so expressive, I can read every emotion.

They're like three black cats with wide, glowing eyes.

Enzo chuckles, and the sound shoots straight to my pussy, making me wet. Why do I love the idea of being on display for them? I've caught all three of them ogling my breasts now, and no wonder I feel like a museum specimen.

There's something strangely hot about having all of their glowing, monstrous eyes on my flesh, stripping me bare to the point where even my heart is exposed.

That trussed-up turkey is finally starting to make me jealous, and I'd love to be served to all three monsters on a shiny silver platter.

*No, you don't, Belle. Pull yourself together!*

I just wish I knew what all three of them looked like. But it adds to the allure, I suppose.

Grey pulls the other leg off the turkey, and now he slaps that greasy poultry onto my plate. “Eat up. With an appetite like that, you’ll have no problem surviving here.”

He continues to laugh, and I think Enzo and Nero sigh in annoyance. Nero even mutters, “So uncouth.”

Well, I’m sorry. I guess I should eat more *ladylike* then.

We finish eating the rest of our meal in silence. Grey continues to pile my plate, and each time I make him proud when I put it all away.

All the while, my mind lingers on their fourth companion, and it almost seems unfair that he has to miss out on dinner all because of me.

All because he’s unhinged.

I hope that monster isn’t hungry up in the East Wing.

Why do I have the feeling that I’m going to regret that statement later?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Madec

I WRITHE AND TWIST in my chains, knowing that there's a delicious morsel of a woman in the castle just *begging* to be devoured.

Sweet, sweet Belle. From the moment I first tasted her on my tongue, I just knew that I had to have a sample, and damn these accursed chains!

My long tongue slurps from my lips as I imagine licking her wet pussy, and this is just pure torture.

Curse my brothers for locking me up in the East Wing Tower! Especially after I promised I wouldn't hurt her *too* much.

I knew the instant that I smelled her that we were a match, and my body can't handle it. My dick is as hard as stone, and if he doesn't find a hole to slip inside of soon, then there's no telling what he'll do.

Yes, my dick has a mind of its own, and he wants out of these chains!

I freeze then as I pick up on a distant sound. My nostrils flare as I sniff, sniff, sniff, and when that sweet nectar hits the roof of my mouth, my senses explode into a rainbow of colors.

Fuck!

Must get out of these chains! Must find my mate and *fuck* her.

My muscles bulge as I yank hard on my chains, desperate to escape from the tower and find my mate. She's horny and she needs me. Next, my roar echoes through the castle and into the lonely night, and I feel for any passers-by outside the grounds right now.

I bet they're shitting their pants.

I don't stop tugging on the chains, ripping my shackles loose as I'm eager to get to my mate. It takes some work. My muscles expand the more I tug, growing bigger and stronger as they burst through the seams of my shirt, and soon I'm nothing more than a raging mountain of testosterone.

Horny and crazy were never a good mix, I suppose.

Veins protrude across my arms and legs as I push my body to its limits, and when the chains finally snap, I zoom around the tower like a hamster on its wheel, then shoot out the window toward my mate.

I land on the ledge outside her window, watching as she tosses and turns beneath the sheets, and I can feel the heat from her body through the glass.

Licking my lips, I rake my claws down the smooth surface, my scorching breath steaming the glass, and she vanishes behind a cloud of vapor.

My dick sticks up like a sword, bouncing against the swollen muscles of my stomach, and hello, *Excalibur*. Like a true king, I'm going to fuck her with my weapon. But only because she wants me to.

As I said, I can smell the desire dripping between her legs.

Must find a way in. Must get to my mate.

I squeeze my incorporeal body through a crack alongside the window, slithering inside the room like a toxic cloud of smoke, and once I materialize on the other side, I loom over her bed.

I'm the thing of nightmares as I watch her sleeping, and my precious little beauty...

She's even more beautiful than I imagined.

Her sloped nose wrinkles as she dreams about me, her night-time lover, and now those soft, lush lips part, breathing out a simple request. "Come to me..."

Well, if she insists.

It appears she's still dreaming, so I decide to wait a little longer, slipping my tendrils into her pretty little mind.

Time to explore her psyche. What really gets her excited?

Whereas Grey devours human fears, I consume their lust, and this woman is full to the brim of the hot, spicy stuff. Her lust has a distinctive scent, sweet and spicy, like a stick of cinnamon, and I can't wait to shove my big, fat cock inside her.

Only when she's awake, though. I want her to be awake and fully aware when I take her for the first time.

Her eyes flutter open next, and I peer into those soft hazel irises. The green catches the light from the stars outside, almost making them glow like stars in their own right, and I stare, spellbound.

My heart beats twice as fast, and what the fuck? I don't think it has ever thumped like that before.



“It’s... you. Madoc,” she breathes, her voice shaky with nerves.

A purr leaves my lips, and I caress her right cheek with my tendril. Belle shudders and closes her eyes as a trill runs through her whole body.

“Yes, my beauty. I heard you calling for me in your dreams, and don’t worry. I’m here for you now. I’ll relieve that itch in your sweet loins.”

Her breasts swell at the sound of my promise, and now her heart beats faster, punching through her chest.

“It’s okay... don’t be afraid,” I assure her, leaning closer so I can whisper into her ear.

My tongue slips out of my mouth, coiling inside her ear, and she mewls like a kitten. Sweat gathers on her upper lip, and I know it’s not out of fear.

She’s aroused.

“J-just s-shut up and *touch* me...” she stammers, shuddering at the feel of my wet tongue inside of her.

Well, if she insists. I float above her bed, wrapping her up in my tendrils. I tie her arms above her head, coiling another pair around her ankles, and she’s completely at my mercy.

All mine and no one else’s.

She opens her mouth, and I slip a tendril inside, letting her suck on my ghostly appendage. I’m not sure if she feels it inside her mouth, but I can sure feel her hot, wet tongue. It curls around the tip of my tendril, teasing me, so deeper and deeper I go.

She moans, tipping her head back onto the pillow, and I don’t take my eyes off her. She’s like a thing of fairy tales. True love’s kiss, or whatever they call it, and I can’t believe she’s finally here.

I’ve been waiting my whole life for her. My one and only beauty. My mate.

I’m going to fuck her into the next dimension.

## CHAPTER NINE

## *Belle*

WELL, IT APPEARS I'VE completely lost my mind. I'm letting an otherworldly beast from another dimension fuck my mouth with his ghostly arm and I've fallen headfirst into the abyss.

I don't think I will ever crawl back out again.

He broke into my room. Only God knows how long he had been watching me sleep before I opened my eyes. Who's to say that he hasn't cast a spell over me and made me lust for him?

I'd been dreaming about him, after all. I saw his burning, red eyes, creating scorch marks across my soul, and when I awoke, there he was, looming over my bed.

I thought I was still dreaming at first, but nope. It seems he broke out of the East Wing, answering my call, and who am I kidding?

I want these monsters. Everything about them intrigues me, and I just want to feel all of their icy-cold tendrils inside of me as they lay me bare.

They can eat my mind, heart, and spirit; I don't care. I may as well have my fun while I'm drowning in this abyss.

Madoc's tendril probes my mouth deeper, teasing the back of my throat, and a moan escapes my lips. I never would have dreamed of being fucked in this way. His arm tastes like licorice, that dark black candy from my childhood, and it's the only thing I want to devour from here on out.

He stretches my arms and legs further apart, reminding me of how trapped I really am, and even if I wanted to, I couldn't move.

I truly am under his spell. I can feel his shadows filling every part of my soul. While cold at first, the ice soon settles, spreading warmth to my toes and fingers.

The heat grows like a flame inside of me, and I never want it to end. Another tendril snakes around my torso, stopping at my breasts where he uses the tip of his ghostly limb to flick my nipple. A jolt thrums up and down my spine, creating a path from my breasts to my pussy, and the momentum builds up inside as I reach my peak.

“That’s right, my beauty. Climb that mountain peak, fall right over the edge. I’ll always catch you. My mate...”

Wait, what?

Before I can think further about his strange use of words, an orgasm takes me by surprise, and a white-hot heat seizes my vision. I arch my spine, squeezing my eyes tight shut as it crashes through me like a wave. I try to scream, but my voice is muffled by his thick tendril, and it’s no use. I’m trapped.

I flop down onto the bed in a tired, boneless heap as he drags another orgasm out of me, slipping a tendril between my folds. My body trembles when he caresses the tip of his limb around my clitoris, making me cry out in pleasure. More white heat blinds me as my body spasms, and on and on it goes.

I’m in pure rapture; my mouth, pussy, and breasts are at the complete mercy of this monster, and who knew sex could have felt like this? It certainly wouldn’t have felt this way with a human man; it definitely wouldn’t have been this fucking amazing with Gustave.

I don’t think my body will be able to take this heat much longer. Another second of this mind-numbing pleasure, and I may just combust from the sheer thrill of it all.

I’m pretty sure I’m having an out-of-body experience, my soul being dragged from its body as he lifts me high into the air, taking me to levels that I could only dream of.

If I die, well, I’ll go out in the best way possible.

Before long, I’m dropped back onto the mattress, my eyes snapping open as they dart around the room in search of him.

Where did he go?

Pleasure still ripples through my body as I pant for breath. My sheets are soaked right through as every inch of my flesh is covered in sweat, and what gives?

After giving me the best goddam sex in my life, he just gets up and leaves?

I don’t think so.

“H-hey... come back...”

Only silence greets me when I raise my neck, trying to see through the darkness. That’s when a menacing chuckle has me looking straight ahead, and there he is, a black shadow with eyes as bright

as embers. He truly does look like the devil right now.

Madoc.

It appeared he didn't leave after all.

Once again, his tendrils lock me in place, wrapping around my arms and legs like blackened snakes, and this time I wholly embrace them.

Anything for more of that mind-numbing pleasure.

“Not just yet, my beauty. I just want to look at you. You're simply glowing.”

He can stare all he wants; so long as he does what he just did to my body again and again. Through the fog, my mind lingers on a word he used.

Madoc had called me his mate. Why?

Keeping my eyes closed, I let the words escape my mouth. “Why did you call me your mate?”

Madoc stills, his eyes scorching my flesh as he contemplates my words. Then he laughs. “Because you are my beauty. I've been waiting my whole life for you, and it appears you have finally come to me. I'm not letting you out of my sight again.”

His words make no sense. How can I be his mate? He's a monster, and I'm human.

I continue with my questions. “Well, how did you escape the tower? The others said they chained —”

A cool finger presses against my lips, shushing me into silence, and now I gaze into his bright scarlet eyes.

He extends a claw from his finger, but only just slightly. The sharp tip punctures the skin of my lips, and I feel a small pinch, and then a ripple of pleasure.

That claw-tipped finger trails down my face, brushing over my skin ever so slightly. It's only when he reaches my shirt that he uses a little more force, the sound of tearing fabric reaching my ears as he exposes my breasts.

Goosebumps pop on my breasts, creating rings around my nipples, and I sigh in ecstasy. Madoc wedges his face between my legs, and my body shudders when his hot breath brushes against my sensitive sex.

He still ties me in place with his tendrils, and I can't move my body for the life of me. Something wet brushes against my pussy, and I gasp, sinking my head back onto my pillow.

It comes again, and it takes me a moment to realize that it's his tongue. It flicks out like the tongue of a lizard, tasting the heat of my core, and he really is inhuman.

Just how long is that tongue of his?

When he licks again, he slips the forked-tip between my folds, and I buck my hips toward his eager mouth. Deeper and deeper he probes, curling all the way inside, and I pant for breath as stars flash in my eyes.

“D-don’t stop,” I beg, and the monster grants me my wish, pushing in further until the forked tip of his tongue grazes a sensitive bundle of nerves.

With my mouth now free, I cry out in pleasure, allowing those stars to completely blind me as I give myself over to him.

His thick tongue completely fills me, and before long he reaches my uterus. My body fires up, lifting off the bed once again as he licks, licks, licks, dragging another earth-shattering orgasm from my core.

I grip the bedsheets with my fingers, tossing my head side to side as he brings me to my crest with that sticky proboscis, and it’s the best goddamn head I’ve ever had.

When I’m done with yet another mind-blowing orgasm, he slips back out, slurping his tongue into his mouth like spaghetti, and that’s when I meet his burning eyes.

A pair of tapered, reptilian pupils stare straight back at me, and they’re all I can see in the gloom. A half-moon smile of razor-sharp teeth materializes on that dark face, and despite how terrifying he looks between my legs right now, I’ve never felt so calm.

It may be the afterglow of ten, no, fifteen orgasms that he just gave me, but I truly am not afraid of him.

My monster. That’s what he is now.

It looks like I caved to the abyss in the end, and not only is it staring straight back at me, it's fucking my pussy with its long, wet tongue too.

I never want to leave the darkness again.

# CHAPTER TEN

# Grey

IT'S BELLE'S FIRST MORNING at the castle, and Enzo has given *me* the honor of calling her to breakfast.

How fucking privileged I feel right now having to wake that grumpy nag from her sleep.

I hope she had sweet dreams because I certainly didn't. I couldn't relax all night, knowing she was asleep in the same building, and I swear I could smell the musky scent of her lust.

It seemed as if she'd been having sex dreams and good for her. It appears she's already making herself at home in our humble abode.

I bang on the door when I reach her room. "Hey, breakfast is ready."

I get no answer. So I bang again, losing my patience, and the door rattles in its frame. "Did you hear me in there? Get up! Those pancakes and bacon won't eat themselves."

For a bunch of monsters, we really are pathetic. I can't believe we were once the four kings of the Great Abyss, but now look at us, eating pancakes and bacon for breakfast. We should be eating human emotions.

We should be eating Belle.

I'd rather slather her up in maple syrup.

Just the thought of her large breasts coated in that sticky liquid makes my cock hard, and I press my hand against the wall, creating a dent in the plaster as I try to get a hold of myself. My wings flap behind me, wafting my hair, and I can't stand this.

That woman is tempting me, but I want no part in her games. I only want to devour her pretty fears. They fuel me, sustaining my miserable being into the next millennia.

I don't want her, and I don't need her. We can find our own way back to the Abyss. We don't need a mate.



A giggle sounds from her room, and I look up at the door, alarmed.

What the hell does she find so goddamn funny? She's a prisoner. She shouldn't be so happy.

That's when another scent catches the attention of my nose, one of fire and brimstone, and my nostrils flare, blowing out plumes of smoke.

Madoc.

He escaped his fucking tower.

Shit.

I push the door open, expecting to see the worst, but what I find instead truly surprises me.

My normally disturbed brother cocoons his shadowy body around the human female, playing the big spoon as he holds her to his chest. He tickles her ear with his long-ass tongue, swirling it around inside the shell, and she breaks out into another adorable fit of laughter.

She's as naked as the day she was born, and I can't look away from the pink nipples of her swollen breasts.

Belle gasps when she finally realizes that I'm standing there, and she frantically lifts her sheets to her breasts, covering up.

"G-Grey!" she squeaks, her cheeks flushing bright red, and the sight of her embarrassment sends blood straight to my dick.

I'm too shocked to move.

Madoc sneers up at me with a shit-eating grin on his face, his red eyes tapered like a smug cat's, and that's when I feel it bubbling deep inside of me.

Red-hot rage.

How *dare* he...

Belle is mine!

"You bastard!" I roar, storming into the room.

Belle squeals in fear, hiding under the sheets. My brother protects her with his body, baring his needle teeth at me in challenge, and I freeze.

I clench my fists, taking several deep breaths as I close my eyes, becoming green with envy. Oh, I'm familiar with the emotion. I've tasted it on many humans, and it usually fuels me as much as fear does.

Yet not today.

Fuck envy.

Belle's little puffs of breath are the only sound in the room right now as she covers her face, shaking in fear, and this time I don't like how it smells on her.

I don't want her to be afraid. Not of me, or of anything.

Fuck Madoc.

"What on earth is all the ruckus?" a deep voice says behind me, and it appears Enzo has entered the room.

He freezes at the threshold, taking in the sight of our insane brother as he protects Belle from me.

"Did Grey finally scare away our guest? Oh..."

Nero arrives this time, and a choking silence fills the room as the five of us don't move.

All eyes are on Belle and Madoc, and there's no denying it. He has claimed her as his mate, and the news tears me apart.

We should have used stronger chains. But nothing can stop our brother. Once he has set his sights on something, that's it. He takes it. No questions.

He's the youngest of us, yet the strongest. There was a reason why he commanded our army back at the Abyss while I was in charge of strategy.

I'm no match.

I've had enough. I storm out of the room, pushing Nero out of the way in my bid to get away from Belle and her tempting scent.

I need air. Fuck breakfast, and fuck Madoc.

Stripping myself down to my birthday suit, I rush out the front door and flap my wings, soaring high over the clouds as the whole world spreads below me.

I soon land in a forest clearing, ripping a tree from the ground as I scare all the wildlife, but I'm past the point of caring. No tree or squirrel is safe when I'm as livid as this, and all I want to do is find some weak human and suck the fear from them.

But I haven't got it in me.

Once I've torn out every tree from its roots, I sink to the ground, letting my wings cocoon me as I hide away from the world.

I'm safe within the leathery confines of my wings where no one can hurt me, least of all a beautiful, doe-eyed brunette with skin as white as snow.

Belle.

It appears I have found my mate after all.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## Belle

GREY NEVER RETURNED AFTER he went sulking off somewhere, even going so far as to miss breakfast, but what do I care? He's just a big old grump.

I'd had the best goddamn sex of my life. I caved in the end to one of those monsters, and it looks as if I really am going to hell.

I will never crawl back out from the abyss. I've made a permanent nest there, and I may as well start paying rent.

The things I let that beast do to my body. It's enough to make your grandmother's toes curl. Well, unless she was into that kind of stuff.

Breakfast was tense. Neither Enzo nor Nero talked. All the while, Madoc kept piling my plate, over and over, making sure I had plenty to eat, and it seems he really is keen on me. He says I am his mate and that he is devoted to me, and so far I've just gone along with it.

I can't be his mate. He's a monster. The thought is preposterous.

Yet I can't deny that there's chemistry. I felt it between my legs, but that's just lust. While no human man could ever bring me to the same heights as Madoc, in the end, it was just sex.

There's no point going around devoting ourselves to each other. So, why do I get the feeling I will be eating my words later?

No! I cannot let myself fall for those monsters. I came here to kill them, not make *love* to them.

I need to keep my head above the water. I will not succumb again. This castle is doing strange things to my mind, warping my imagination, and I have to do everything in my power to escape.

I still haven't forgotten my goal: one day, I will set humanity free of the monsters, and return our world to its former prestige. I will bring back the sun and extinguish the darkness from the land.

There are no two ways about it. The monsters have to go. So I can't afford to let myself get distracted, playing pretty little housewife for four larger-than-life beasts with long, forked tongues, prehensile tails, horns, and batwings.

Damn. I'm getting horny just thinking about that list, wondering what it would be like to have all four of them doing things to my body at once, and it's time I got an ice-cold shower.

I'm pretty sure they can read my mind. They always respond when I'm feeling particularly aroused about something taboo.

I mean, come on. They're monsters. You can't get more taboo than that.

After breakfast, Enzo gave me free rein to explore the castle, and Madoc came with me every step of the way. His brothers had determined that he was sane enough to let loose around the house, so now the big, shadowy monster follows me around wherever I go like a lost puppy.

A deranged lost puppy.

Ever since we had sex, I've started to make out more of his features. Beneath the otherworldly shadows, I spy a violent shade of red skin, just like his eyes, and the texture is as coarse as sandpaper.

He's the only one I have touched so far, and there's no denying the hardness of his chest. My fingers grazed a prominent eight-pack, and are they all ripped beneath those shadows? It almost seems unfair that I don't get to see, yet they get to see all of my pretty parts. Well, Madoc does, anyhow. He's seen my breasts and sucked on my clitoris. He's even stuck his long proboscis inside of me, and I really have become a naughty girl.

Maybe one day I can chase the shadows away from their bodies, and get to see all of my monsters.

No. Not *my* monsters. I really have to stop that.

I'm striding down one long hallway, in particular, the eyes of creepy statues following me every step of the way, and Madoc is hot on my heels. He trails behind me like, well, a shadow, and I wonder what it will take to just get a few moments of peace.

He's protective, which he explains is due to our bond, but I can take care of myself. I always have. When my mom died, it had just been me and my father, and so I took it upon myself to look after him. I cooked his meals and made sure he didn't go too far off the rails when he was down in the lab cooking up some new invention.

So I don't need to be babysat like a child.

The word *child* gives me an idea then. I turn to the monster, a sly Cheshire cat grin creeping up my face. "Hey, Madoc..."

The monster rises to his full height at the sound of my breathy voice, sticking his chest out, and I have to crane my neck to take in all seven feet of him.

Yikes. I can't believe all of *that* was on top of me last night, consuming me like a gigantic snake, and a delightful shiver shoots straight between my thighs.

His glowing crimson eyes never leave me, and I bite my lip. A soft purr sounds in his chest as his fiery gaze tracks the movement of my teeth.

"Yes, my beauty?"

"I was thinking that we could play a game. You know, like hide and seek?"

Yes, hide and seek. I haven't played that game since I was ten.

Madoc's eyes light up like a child's on Christmas morning, and I knew he would fall for my bait. Out of all of them, he appears to be the most child-like.

"Anything for you, my beauty..."

I really wish he would stop calling me that; there's nothing pretty about me. I sigh, drawing closer. I reach my hand out and watch as my fingers vanish into the shadows of his chest. There I trace the grooves of his chiseled muscles, and the monster shudders beneath my touch.

He really does have the body of a god, and I can't stop myself as I run my hand down to his thighs, his rough sandpaper skin grating my fingers, and I want to feel that skin on my pussy.

Will his cock be as grainy and coarse? Would it be as long as his tongue?

Lower and lower I go until I feel that hard shaft beneath his pants. Madoc shudders when I squeeze my fingers over the bulge, and just like that, I have him at my beck and call.

Maybe I'm more powerful than I realized.

"You hide, and I will seek. How does that sound?" I whisper, making sure my voice is extra hot.

The monster lowers himself, and his shadowy face hovers inches from mine. He grins, showing me all of his devilish teeth as he lets his long tongue slip out.

The sticky appendage licks my cheek, leaving a trail of hot saliva, and a breathy moan escapes my lips when his scent completely smothers me.

Fire. He smells like fire. And of pure sin.

I have to have a taste of that fire one day.

“As you wish, my beauty...” he breathes, his shadows enveloping me before he vanishes into a cloud. I’m left panting for breath, his scorching saliva marking my skin.

Fuck. I want him. I *need* him. But I have to do this. I need to find some dirt on these monsters, and maybe then we can defeat them.

So I tread down more hallways, thinking unsexy thoughts as I peek into various rooms. I find a giant grand piano inside one, and fancy art and paintings in another, but nothing too out of the ordinary.

It’s not until I stumble upon the West Wing that my curiosity is piqued. The stairs seem to beckon me as I slowly ascend, making my way up the swirling staircase.

I’m pretty sure Enzo said not to come this way, but I’ve always been the rebellious type. I’ve never followed rules, and I don’t conform to convention.

When I reach the top, I lean against the wall, catching my breath. That’s a little too many stairs than my body can handle. I’ve always been strong, but I’m going to have to up my game.

These monsters are so much stronger than me, and I need my strength if I hope to beat them.

My gaze lands on a door, and I try my hand at opening it. Locked. Typical. Well, I could always search the next tower.

The moment I walk away, the door creaks behind me, and that’s odd. I’m pretty sure it was locked before.

Did it open of its own accord?

Maybe this house does have a mind of its own.

Carefully, I step into the room, disappointed to find nothing of interest. It’s full of broken furniture, and one large portrait of four men.

Well, I think they’re men. I step closer to investigate.

There are three claw marks streaked across the painting. So I lift the peeled canvas up with my fingers, dropping it once again with a loud gasp.

It’s four monsters.

Each of them sits on a blackened throne in a medieval-style courtyard. One has eyes and skin the color of topaz, and a pair of golden horns growing from a mane of orange hair, and he resembles some kind of horned lion. He has sharp teeth, claws, and it takes me a moment to put two and two together.

Wait. Could it be Enzo?

While he may look like a monster, he still has features that are eerily human-like, like a cleft chin and a strong, aquiline nose.

On his left is a gray-skinned man with sharp teeth jutting out like an underbite. He has glowing green eyes and a hair color to match, and large gargoyle wings.

It's Grey.

On Enzo's right is a younger man with short blue hair and violet eyes, and that must be Nero. A long lion's tail rests on his lap, and the tufts at the end match his blue hair.

And last but not least is Madoc, looking like the devil himself. He's red all over. Scarlet eyes, skin, and hair, which sticks up like wayward flames. He poses for the painter, sticking his long tongue out like he's a member of the rock band KISS, and his eyes seem to burn through the canvas.

It's like he's staring straight at me: his future mate.

All four of them watch me.

My head swirls, and I stumble back, letting go of the painting. The blood rushes through my head.

Shit. Now I can put a face to those shadowy monsters, and that's not good. I need to be able to kill them one day, and how can I do that when I know what they look like?

It's easier to kill something when it doesn't have a face.

I bump into a table, whirling around. My eyes widen when they land on a floating black rose inside of a bell jar.

I've never seen a black rose before. Especially a floating one.

I lean closer, my face reflecting off the smooth glass when I peer into the bell jar. It's like the rose has been dipped in shining ink. The petals, the leaves, and even the stem are coated in shiny black. The thorns look lethal and appear to be made from some strange type of rock. Granite perhaps?

A few blackened petals have fallen from the rose, and it appears to be wilting. Yet slowly.

Is it being sustained by magic?

Carefully, I lift the bell jar, reaching my hand across to touch the rose. It goes straight through the flower, and is it an illusion?

Nothing happens. The rose appears to just be a hologram. Yet the moment I remove my hand, a series of images rushes through my mind.

I spy the faces of my monsters, Enzo, Nero, Grey, and Madoc, screaming in anguish, and through the gloom, a woman's voice intones: *"Only when you win the heart of a stubborn human female will you be able to return to the Abyss..."*

More agonizing images, and my body freezes. I try to cry out, reaching for my monsters as they vanish into a swirling vortex, but I'm helpless to save them.



The woman's voice continues. *"If you don't succeed in winning the heart of a human woman before the last petal falls, then you will all be doomed to live in the mortal realm forever..."*

She stops, and I gasp, darting my eyes around the room. I'm alone, but I could have sworn someone had just been standing beside me.

The hair rises up on the back of my neck.

The woman's words echo through my mind. I appear to be a part of some prophecy, and this isn't good.

I have to get out of here.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

## Enzo

I WANDER THE HALLWAYS of the castle, picking up on the rose scent of Belle. She disappeared an hour ago with Madoc, and I haven't sensed her since.

Ever since she arrived at the castle, she's the only thing I've been able to smell, and I can't get the beautiful brunette off my mind.

I want her. But Madoc has already marked her, and we can't have a fight breaking out between us. We are brothers. While we may not be brothers in the human sense, we are truly brethren. We ruled together, and we were banished together.

And we will return home together.

I just need to get Madoc to see sense. I truly believe that Belle belongs to all of us. The spell claims that we need to get a human woman to fall in love with the four of us, and that means we have to learn to share.

How much easier it would be if Belle only had to fall for one of us, then we'd be back home in the flap of a wingbeat. But the curse claims that we need to find a woman to fall in love with each one of us, a bunch of monsters, and we really have our work cut out.

I pick up on my brother's fire and brimstone scent, following it to the supply closet where we store our cleaning supplies. As you can imagine, it's Nero's favorite room in the entire castle, and I'm surprised that my violet-eyed brother isn't in there instead of Madoc.

Well, I best get to the bottom of this new development. I'm pretty used to Madoc's bizarre ways, but this is taking it a little too far.

I yank the door open, and the giant imbecile jumps out, spreading his arms wide.

"Ta-da! You found me, my beauty!"

Madoc's face completely falls when he sees that it's just me, another monster, and now his whole body deflates. "You're not my beauty."

I sigh. "I'm afraid not, dear brother. So, where *is* our human guest?"

Madoc scratches his head, a sheepish expression forming on his normally terrifying face, and he really can be insufferable at times. I can't believe he let her out of his sight.

And he claims that she's his mate. If it were me in his place, I'd have chained her to my side. And if she let me, I would have tied a leash around her neck, guiding her around like the precious little pet she is.

The image of Belle tied to the end of a leash has my dick swelling between my legs, and I try to rein my lust in.

I wouldn't just put a leash on her. I'd blindfold her too, tie her hands behind her back, and find her a sexy set of red lingerie.

I must stop with the provocative thoughts, or I won't be able to think straight. I'm supposed to be the responsible one after all. I was the head king back in the Abyss for a reason.

"The last time I checked, she was heading to the West Wing..." Madoc replies, shrugging his shoulders as if it's nothing, and my eyes bulge.

The West Wing? Where we keep the enchanted rose?

Oh, dear, lord, no.

Before I do something that I regret to my dim-witted brother, I turn into a being of pure smoke, vanishing into the walls, and there's no doubt in my mind when I arrive at the West Wing Tower.

The bell jar has shifted from its place ever so slightly, yet the rose remains intact, slowly taunting us as the years go by. However, it's been shedding its petals at a much faster rate these days, and it won't be long until the last one falls. Then we'll be stuck here forever, cursed to live amongst humans.

As much as we need humans to sustain our monstrous spirits, we still can't stand to be around them any longer than we need to. Which is why the curse is so bittersweet.

We need to find a human woman to fall in love with all four of us, and it won't be an easy task. I've sensed Belle's desire dripping between her thighs, especially when she's around any one of us for an extended length of time, but sex is just sex.

Too many humans mistake it for love, but we have to win more than just her pussy. She has to give us her heart too.

And now she's gone. She must have heard the curse and has run off in fear as a result.

I have to find her before it's too late.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## Belle

THE LONG FINGERS OF branches scratch at my arms and legs as I stumble through the forest. The voice of the enchanted woman repeats through my mind: “*Only when you win the heart of a stubborn human female will you be able to return to the Abyss...*”

Well, it's obvious that I'm that stubborn woman, and holy shit. I'm a part of some prophecy.

The monsters cannot return to their homeland until each of them wins the heart of a stubborn human female, and like *hell* is it going to be me.

I am not some pawn in their twisted game; I am a person with rights, and I won't be a part of some stupid prophecy.

I have to escape, have to find my father, and get the hell away from here. Just maybe there is a sunny little corner of the world left where the monsters' curse has yet to spread. A corner filled with blue skies, rainbows, and lollipops that grow on trees...

Yeah, I'm kidding myself if I think such a place still exists. The monsters' shadows are everywhere now. You can't escape them and most of all: you can't run away from them.

Once they get under your skin, that's it. You will never know a moment of happiness again. I actually let one of those beasts touch me, and no amount of scrubbing and cleaning will ever remove that monster's filth from my body. I've been infected, and worse of all, I am convinced that I am falling for them and that the idea of their bodies brings me nothing but carnal pleasure.

I've been tainted, and I have to get away.

They may have won my pussy, but they will never have my heart. Period. That thing is sacred and only reserved for the people I truly care about.

And they're all waiting for me back at the village.

A shadow whizzes through the trees, and I pause, darting my eyes around the forest. It is getting kind of dark, even though it's light out.

There hasn't been much sun since the monsters took over, the sky a permanent black cloud, but the tree canopy is so thick here, it's hard to tell whether it's day or night.

The people from the village did always say that the forests around the monsters' castle were cursed. I noticed it on my way here, but the path had been clearer back then. As if fate had granted me clear access to the beasts' home.

Shaking the silly thought away, I push through the shrubs, trying to find an exit out of this jungle. I swear the flora has increased in volume. It's getting thicker and thicker the further I descend, and I must be losing my mind.

Another shadow appears in my periphery, and I jerk around, trying to see through the trees.

"Who's there," I say aloud, my fingers tightening around the handle of my blade.

As if I was ever going to leave without it. It's been hiding under my skirt this whole time.

No voice answers my call, so I continue my aimless trek through the forest, having the uncanny feeling that I am being watched.

Blinking eyes peer through the trees, and I have half a mind to stab each one of them. Why don't they just take a picture? It will last longer.

My hair rises on end as there comes an eerie sound, and I freeze. Now all I hear is my thumping heart as the presence lingers closer, wafting cold breath on the back of my neck.

I shut my eyes and count to ten, trying to stay rational. *Stay calm, Belle. It's just your imagination. You did always have an overactive one, after all. It's because of all those books you read growing up, and now this is the result.*

The creature continues to breathe down the back of my neck, and the stench of decay is all too clear.

There *is* something there, watching, waiting, and all I can do is cry like some helpless princess who got lost in the woods.

Yeah, screw crying. I'm no damsel. I'm Belle: adventurous, spirited, and brave.

With a loud battle cry, I yank a hold of my blade, pushing it into the creature's eye. It squeals, jumping back in alarm, and I stumble on my feet when I get a look at the animal that stalked me through the forest.

I think it's a wolf, but it's bigger. Way, way, bigger, and it appears to be made of shadows.



No, that's no wolf. It's a creature from the land of monsters, where everything is larger, exaggerated, and downright chilling.

Several more shadow wolves appear, surrounding me on all sides, and I'm trapped. I used my one and only weapon on the first wolf that's collapsed to the ground, a cloud of dust flying up in its wake.

Shit.

The wolves stare at their fallen comrade in shock, then turn their noses back on me. Six sets of teeth bare wide fangs, and now they hover closer and closer.

They won't attack at first. They will make me suffer, and I can't help but wonder if these wolves are intelligent. One takes the lead and snaps its teeth, its gaping maw hovering inches before my face. Saliva drips from the creature's fangs, and this is it. I'm going to die.

I send a silent thought to my father. *I'm sorry I never made it home, Dad...*

The wolf swoops in for the kill, and before those teeth graze my cheek, something large shoves it aside, tackling it to the ground. When I glance up, I spy a horned, shadowed beast.

Enzo.

Madoc joins in the fray, cackling like a megalomaniac. He streaks through the trees, taking each wolf by surprise when he slits their throats with his long, jagged claw, and it all happens so fast, I get motion sickness.

I bend my head forward and expel the contents of my stomach, watching as the bile sizzles on the leaf-covered ground. Smoke whirls up from the vomit, and there goes my breakfast.

As I reach up to wipe my mouth, a wolf lunges for me, stretching its jaw toward my neck, and I don't have time to act.

Before its teeth reach me, another shadowy figure takes it out, and now I gaze up at the horrifying form of Grey as he pins the wolf to the ground, ripping its head clean from its shoulders.

I was saved in the end by my monsters.

They came to my aid, and warmth envelops me at the realization. They protected me: monsters I was prepared to kill without a second thought.

Guilt soon replaces the warmth, and my world spins as I slowly lose consciousness.

I think one of those wolves got to me after all.

Fuck.

My vision tunnels, and now everything turns black.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Nero

MY BROTHERS RETURNED HOME with the human unconscious in their arms, and the way Madoc cradled her to his chest, keeping her safe from the world, made my stomach acids seethe with envy and guilt.

My potential mate was in danger, and I never even realized. While my brothers were out playing heroes, I was moping around the castle, fussing over a stain for goodness sake.

As I said, someone needs to keep this castle clean. But it seems my desire for perfection is slowly destroying me.

Unfortunately, I missed out on being one of Belle's shining knights, and now I watch from the doorway as all three of my brothers lay her down on the bed.

She looks so sweet and helpless, like a perfect china doll, and I curse myself yet again for not being there for her.

Even *Grey* got over himself long enough to keep her bloody safe, and I'm really going to have to step up my game if an asshole like my hot-headed brother can even do the right thing.

There's no denying it anymore; she *is* the woman destined to send the four of us back to the Abyss. There's no place for us here, and only hell knows what the enchantress has done to our homeland in our absence.

It's only been five years, but tens of thousands will have already passed in our world.

She will have brought it to ruin.

Madoc nestles down on the bed beside her, and that biting prick of envy stabs at my insides again like a green little monster with a pitchfork.

*Belle is mine...*

Belle should in theory belong to all four of us as was prophesied by the enchantress, but I still can't help but want her all to myself.

She has a gash on her forehead where blood oozes, and I fight the urge to go over and tend to her wound.

I bet it needs cleaning, and I'm good at that. I may be a monster, but I'll always ensure that she has a clean environment and that she is free from the threat of germs. I may not be the most heroic of my brothers, but at least she will never have to worry about getting sick with me around.

"My sweet beauty. What did those monsters *do* to you?" Madoc cries, and I groan inwardly at the sound of his helpless voice.

He's so sappy when he wants to be, and maybe I am truly heartless. He may be insane, but at least he can shed a tear.

I may as well be made from stone.

Grey scoffs, folding his arms in front of his chest. "Interesting word choice, brother. We're monsters too, you know."

"Still," Madoc replies, brushing Belle's hair with his large, clawed hand. She truly does look small at that moment; his palm completely encompasses her heart-shaped face, and I just wish I could go over there and comfort her too.

But I can't.

"I would never dream of hurting her like those beasts," Madoc continues. "Well, not unless she wants me to..."

He leans over and licks her cheek, and I think I'm going to throw up. For someone so fucking insane, he's pretty gushy. But not me. I'm too emo for that shit: a word I learned from the humans. That would be the best way to describe me. Always so monotone, always so melancholy.

My psycho brother, on the other hand, wears his heart on his goddamn sleeve.

Enzo steps forward and starts cleaning Belle's forehead, and she's in capable hands now. Enzo is not unlike me. Out of the three of my brothers, we're probably the most alike.

We're definitely the most civilized.

"We should leave her to rest," Enzo announces when he's finished cleaning and dressing her wounds, and Madoc protests.

"I won't leave her side again! Who knows what will happen to her if we leave her alone..."

Grey snaps his teeth. “You do realize that she had been running away from us. She left of her own volition.”

Madoc growls, getting in Grey’s face. “You dare talk about my beauty that way. She was just scared. She heard the prophecy and fled in fear. No one could blame her!”

My eyes widen in pleasant surprise. My, I never thought I’d see the day when my psychotic brother showed some empathy. He normally loves to instigate terror, not prevent it. He’s always messing with the villagers’ heads after all.

He’s *way* in over his head.

Still, I don’t want to see him get his heart broken. He loves too easily. A sadistic freak with a big heart; almost seems impossible, but that’s Madoc.

He was forever adopting strays back at the Abyss, and puppies aren't so cute in our homeworld. But Madoc still loved them all. Each time they died, he would fall into a deep depression.

If Belle ever tries to leave us again, he may never come back from the brink. That lovesick idiot will just accept Belle’s wishes while disappearing into himself, becoming a husk or worse: a vengeful, murderous beast hell-bent on killing every human within fifty yards of our castle.

That’s the thing with Madoc. It’s like when you flip a coin; you don’t know which side you will get. Sweet or crazy. It’s enough to give you whiplash.

We may need to lock him up in chains again. Stronger ones this time that won’t break.

Grey storms out of the room, apparently having enough of the sentimental scene. He brushes past me, eyeballing me carefully, but I just give him my best poker face.

“What?”

A mocking sneer stretches his face, showing all his teeth, and I quirk a brow. There's a *seed* stuck in his upper right fang. *Ugh*.

“Don’t act like you don’t want to get all cozy with the human too, little brother. I see it in your big purple eye. You’re smitten with her just as much as our crazy brother.”

“I could say the same for you. You’re in denial and don’t even know it. Thoughts of the woman make you crazy. Hence why you stomped off on one of your world-famous tantrums earlier. How many trees did you rip out from the ground this time?” I ask.

He bares his needle-point teeth and gets in my face, and again I remain poker-faced.

“Fuck you...” he snarls.

Grey shoves me roughly aside, his right wing flapping me in the face on the way out. I flip my tail, whipping him as he passes through the door, and his menacing growl promises me all sorts of hell as

he skulks down the hall.

What's he going to do? Forget to flush the toilet again? Yeah, he knows I hate it when he does that.

He's such a disgusting pig.

With one last look at Belle, I tear myself away from the room and return to my tasks. The castle needs cleaning after all.

A shame we can't just hire a maid.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## *Belle*

**M**Y EYES FLUTTER OPEN as I wake in a strange room. I'm not in my tiny cottage back at the village, but a grand, fancy castle suite with gold molding on the ceiling.

That's when images of nightmarish wolves rush to the fore of my mind, and I jerk upright in a panic, my eyes flickering around the room.

I imagine the shadowy, lupine faces of wolves watching me from the shadows, my heart pounding against my chest, and that's when a weight presses down on the mattress beside me.

I peer around to meet the concerned, red eyes of Madoc. Just his eyes, though. I still have yet to see all of his features, but every now and then, I think I can make out a strong jawline and coarse skin.

I want to see the face that I saw in the portrait.

"How are you feeling my beauty?"

Well, there's a dull, throbbing pain in my forehead, but overall I feel pretty fantastic for a girl who was almost mauled by a pack of shadowy wolves only God knows how many hours ago.

"Pretty good. Thank you for asking."

A smile stretches his face, and I glimpse a pair of sharp fangs. The grin resembles that of a cow skull lying on the desert floor more than anything else, but regardless, I can't help but smile back at him.

He came to my rescue. Three of them had, and I've never felt so conflicted. I had been running away from them, declaring that I would expunge them from the earth, but here I am, being taken care of by one of the monsters I had sworn to obliterate.

Do I even still want to destroy them? I'm not so sure now. I was just shocked before. I didn't know what to make of the prophecy.



I can't be the one destined to send them back to their homeland, right? I mean, the idea is just absurd. Things like that don't happen to me. They happen to others, or to characters that I read about in books.

Nothing magical ever happens to me.

An awkward silence befalls the two of us, and I don't miss the sadness shimmering inside of Madoc's big scarlet eyes. I tried to run away and leave him, and yet he still finds it in his heart to take care of me and call me his beauty.

The monster is convinced that I am his mate, but I'm not so sure. There's no denying that there's chemistry between us, but I want more than just mind-boggling sex.

I want someone who I can depend on. Someone who doesn't treat me like a trophy. It was the reason why I ignored Gustave's advances for so many years.

When we were spending time together, there were fleeting moments where I felt more than a sexual draw between us, and just maybe the prophecy is correct; maybe I am the one to set the monsters free and return them to their homeland.

A cold, cynical part of me tells me that I've only known the monsters a day. One single day and I have no obligation to remain loyal to them.

They imprisoned my father. They imprisoned me. And they have been wreaking havoc on my world for five years. I should not feel guilty.

Yet why does my body feel as if it has been stuffed with lead? It weighs me down on the mattress, and I can't think straight, my mind reeling from the stress of it all.

I guess this is what they call Stockholm Syndrome. I am the captive that has fallen for her captor. Classic.

However, when Madoc lays me down gently on the pillow and whispers sweet nothings into my ear, I start to second guess that criticism.

These monsters have not mistreated me. They saved my life, and I should be grateful to them.

The curse runs through my mind again, and a slow breath blows from my lips as I try to calm my nerves. *I* must be the one to return the monsters to their realm. In all honesty, it seems like the big break I was looking for.

At least I won't have to kill them now.

If I can get these monsters to leave, then all the better for me and my people. I can set us free. But then where does that leave me? Their

so-called-predestined mate?

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” Madoc says beside me, and I look into his eyes. The fire seems to have been dowsed as I gaze up into his blazing orbs, and it seems he does care about me.

Can a monster truly love? It goes against everything I was ever taught about them — creatures that feed off the emotions of humans.

I shift uncomfortably on the bed, wanting to get up and do something. I hate sitting still for too long.

As I try to rise, Madoc pushes me back, and I roll my eyes. Does he think I’m going to run off again? But when I peer back up at him, it’s obvious he’s more concerned about my health, and it touches my heart.

“I’m just going to the toilet,” I lie.

Madoc thinks it through. Even though I can’t see his face, I can tell what he’s thinking inside those big, round eyes, and for a monster, he really is expressive.

“Then I will come with you...”

Seriously? Is this how it’s going to be? Do I need to be babysat every time I go to the toilet now? Seeing no point in arguing, I allow him to accompany me to the bathroom.

Castle life surely will be fun.



Things are tense between me and the monsters as the days go by. Now that I know about the curse, they’re too afraid to bring it up in fear of distressing me, and instead, we all eat in silence.

I don’t miss the side-eyed glare Grey throws across the table as he helps himself to some venison, and the monster hates me. There’s no denying it.

He’s pissed that I tried to run off, and I don’t really understand why. The less of me he has to see, the better.

Still. His behaviors contradict his actions. He saved me from the shadow wolves, along with Enzo and Madoc.

Maybe he does have a heart inside that gray chest.

Now that I know what each of them looks like, I have an easier time picturing their faces beneath those shadows. Nero is reticent as he doesn't glance my way, and it appears I've caused a rift of some kind.

It's not like I asked for any of this. I was only trying to protect my father when I first agreed to stay at the castle, but they're prisoners in their own right.

I don't blame them for being antsy. I bet they miss their homeland, the Abyss. That was the term that the woman used when I heard the playback of the curse, and I've never heard a more accurate term.

Who knew that the monsters had been banished all along?

Does that go for *all* monsters? Or just these four? What makes them so special from the rest that they have to be the ones to find true love? Why not every monster that has taken over the planet?

They appeared to be important figures in their portrait, and were they kings of some kind?

A cold shiver wracks through my body, and I rise to my feet. Each monster turns to look at me. Their eyes track my every movement, and I suddenly feel as if I am under a microscope. I think they expect me to bail again.

"May I be excused?" I ask, keeping my voice polite.

Enzo nods his head at me graciously, steeping his hands as he appears to have finished his plate. "Of course, Belle. You are free to go."

Grey snorts on his side of the table, and I narrow my eyes at him. "What?"

His green eyes bleed into mine when I dare to be so bold, and I've long stopped being scared of him. I'm through with being a helpless damsel.

Grey doesn't respond, returning to his venison, and I've had enough of his bullshit.

I've had enough of all of this.

As I said, I didn't ask to play this part in their lives.

Resigning myself at last, I decide to leave and wander the castle. To my surprise, Madoc doesn't join my side. Enzo follows me out of the room instead as I keep a wide space between us.

He floats behind me, and I tense my shoulders, picking up the pace.

"You don't mind if I join you, right?" he asks, his voice baritone deep, and I squeeze my thighs together.

That voice is like dark chocolate.

A heavy breath escapes me. “No. Go ahead.”

He catches up with me at last, and now we walk together in silence. Well, float in Enzo’s case.

Enzo sighs and his breath brushes the back of my neck, making me tense. “Belle... about what you heard...”

I hunch up further, hiding my face behind my long brown locks. That’s a first for me; coyness is not one of my usual traits.

He continues. “Please don’t let it alarm you. It is only a prophecy. We’re not even entirely sure if you *are* the one...”

More silence, and I bite my lip, trying to keep my thoughts at bay.

Do I want to be the one? I’m still not sure how I feel about these monsters. While I admit they make me feel amazing, it’s going to take more than just winning over my pussy.

“Still... if there’s even the slightest chance that you *are* the one... I don’t want to let that go.”

My body deflates as his words confirm what I already knew. They don’t want me to leave. Not because they care about me specifically, but for what I have to offer them

“So, how about we make a deal?” the horned monster begins. “You stay with us long enough to discover if you are the one who will break the curse. If not, then we will let you go. And we will stop terrorizing your village and feeding from your emotions.”

I pause in the hallway, staring up at him shocked. That’s some deal. We’re talking about winning my heart here, but maybe it’s no different from dating. Not that I’ve been able to do much dating these last several years, but we go on a few dates, see if we mesh, and if not, we part ways.

So, Enzo is willing to offer me my freedom? So long as I am prepared to stay a little longer. Fair enough. If I’m not the one, then I go free.

But if I am? Well, I guess I will cross that bridge when I get there.

He extends a palm, and I spy those retractable claws. Cautiously, I shake his hand, and it’s the strangest deal that I have ever made.

Do I need to sign a contract?

Enzo lets go of my arm then resumes up the hall. “Well, it seems I’ve really got my work cut out if I’m going to win your heart, Belle, and I think I know where to start. Follow me.”

I gaze at his back as he floats down the hall. Where does he plan to take me?

I follow him down the carpeted hallway, and soon we come upon a large, fancy door. I gaze up, hiking a brow. “A door?”

“Wait until you see what is on the other side, Belle, dear. As a monster, one of my gifts is the ability to peer into the emotions of humans, and see all of their wants and desires.”

A shudder runs up my body when he reminds me. No wonder I always feel like I’m under a microscope when I’m near them.

“Well, I know what you desire more than anything else. Adventure. It’s all you’ve ever wanted, ever since you were a little girl. Yet the only adventures you could find were inside the pages of a book, so…”

Enzo pushes the door open, and my chin hits the floor. Bookshelves cover every single wall as they reach the ceiling, and I have to crane my neck just to take them all in. The monster watches me as my eyes rake every shelf, and I’ve never seen so many books in my life.

“So, are you impressed?” he asks.

“Am I!” I squeal, trying to keep my emotions at bay, but I’m an open book. No pun intended.

Not bad. He’s definitely gone up in my books, and I really need to stop with the book puns.

It appears I’m going to lose this mini wager, but what do I care?

I’ve got some books to read.

It’s been a while.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# *Madec*

I GAZE OVER MY mate's shoulder as she reads me her favorite fairy tale, and I could listen to her beautiful voice all day. I could gaze at her luscious red lips all day, watching how they articulate all those complicated words.

She's definitely the smartest person that I know. I really hit the jackpot with this one. Not only beautiful but smart too, and I nearly cum in my pants just thinking about her wearing a pair of sexy glasses.

I never did learn how to read or write. I've always been the brawn in my family, the enforcer so to speak. I was a general; I commanded armies, yet not anymore.

These days, I don't do so much. Sometimes when it gets really bad, and the voices in my head just won't shut up, I will go out to the village and terrorize a few humans.

But it's never enough. I've been feeling pretty useless ever since we were banished to the human world, and I swear if I ever see the enchantress again, I will kill her.

And I will have fun doing it too.

I'm a maniac, after all. No one can stop me.

I was a lot more civilized back in the Abyss; I had to be if I was commanding armies. But out in the human world, where my insanity has been given free rein to do whatever it pleases, well, I'm unstoppable.

The enchantress has no idea what she set in motion the day she banished us. She's only made me hungrier for revenge.

We'll get our thrones back one day.

I focus on my mate again, smiling like a lovesick idiot as she still reads to me, and it's like I'm not even in the room anymore.

She's completely immersed in that book, and she really does love reading. The sun shines down on her chestnut brown hair from the large window, bringing out shades of red and burgundy, and my heart thuds faster the longer I stare at her.

Her lips really are delicious, and are they naturally red or does she paint them? And that face. It's so powdery yet flush; I bet she was the envy of a lot of women back in her village.

Belle's looks have no parallel.

I guess I should thank the enchantress when it comes to Belle. If she hadn't banished us, then I never would have met my beauty.

Having her teach me how to read and write is the best goddamn thing in the world. It may sound insane, but I knew she was destined for me the moment I scented her, and I just want to protect her and keep her safe.

No one will hurt her under my watch, and I will happily bring down her enemies if anyone so much as made her unhappy.

She finally reaches the end of her book, glancing my way. Her eyes widen as she stretches her hand, grazing my cheek with her soft fingers, and now she parts those full lips.

"I'm starting to see you more clearly as the days go by."

I shut my eyes, enjoying the sensation of her fingers against the coarse skin of my cheek. I'm not sure why my features are becoming more discernible to her, but it could have to do with the bond.

I feel it growing stronger between us every day, and it's magnetic. Honestly, I'm finding it harder to remember what my life was like before I met her, and how is that possible?

Now I can't even fathom my life with her, and the thought terrifies me to my core.

My heart plummets when I remember her leaving us next, so I try to shake the images away. No matter what she chooses, I will support her. I don't even have it in me to be upset at her for trying to escape; she was just scared.

It's not as if she asked to be a part of the prophecy, but I will have to respect her wishes if she chooses to forsake our bond.

When I think about it hard enough, I don't really care if we never return to the Abyss. I just want to be with Belle.

Wherever she goes, I go. And if that means I have to be banished to the human world for an eternity, so be it.



Enzo and I are going to prove that we can win her heart, and now I take her hand, staring deep into her hazel eyes. It looks as if I have a lot of work to do. It will be no easy feat. I know Belle is not the usual type to be swooned so easily, so I need to up my game.

I will also have to keep my insanity in check if I hope to win her over and prove that I am some kind of prince charming.

“Belle... I just want you to know that no matter what, you will always have me. I’m your monster.”

Words, words, words. They mean very little in the grand scheme of things. Actions speak louder than words, and there is just no way to show her how I truly care about her.

Belle rolls her eyes, tossing the book aside. Then she grabs my cheeks, whispering against my lips, “Shut up and kiss me, psycho.”

My eyes pop in pleasant surprise when I hear the word. Did she just call me psycho?

I’m too drunk on her scent to care. Her hot breath wets my cheeks, making me grow harder in my pants, and she’s right. I really am a psycho.

Who am I kidding? I will never be some prince charming; I’m a freaking otherworldly beast. All I can think about doing now is chaining her against the wall while I rake my claws down her porcelain skin.

I’m losing my self-control, and now my inner psycho repeats like a mantra inside my head.

*Mine, mine, mine.*

Chaining a woman up is not the way to her heart, so I must learn some decorum.

Belle’s grip doesn’t leave my face as she traces circles around my cheek with her thumb, tempting me further, and this is true torture.

Enzo warned me not to do anything too hasty. Our first night together was just a warm-up. Wait until she gets a taste of the real thing.

“I know you want me...” she whispers, her breath fanning my face, and my claws retract.

All I can think about is licking her all over, my spittle dripping down her large pebbled breasts.

“Do it, Madoc. I’m yours to do whatever you want. I don’t need a gentleman. I just want you. I want a psycho.”

Well, so long as she has given me permission.

Darkness consumes me at last as I envision all the things I am about to do to her, and now my shadows gobble her whole.

She gasps when I fly us out of the stuffy library and all the way to the West Wing. Once there, I chain her to the wall.

Belle glances around in confusion, her eyes rolling around in her skull as I bet the flight up here has left her dizzy. But she soon gets her bearings, rattling her chains as she tries to break free.

Her eyes find mine at once, and her pupils blow out. The only lights we have are the flickering candles, and they bask her in a warm glow. They even bring out the green of her eyes.

A sinister sneer curves my lips as I envision all the things I'm about to do to her.

My precious beauty.

Here's to winning her heart.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## *Belle*

**M**Y RAPID BREATHS BOUNCE off the walls as the shadowy form of Madoc looms closer, enveloping me in darkness, and there's no way I'm going to survive after this.

I bite my lip as I imagine all the things he's going to do to my body, and now my lungs pump faster as I suppress a groan.

"My beauty..." he whispers, creeping ever closer, and my heart whacks against my ribs.

Sweat coats my skin the closer he gets. The room becomes hotter, and I'm sure it even spins at one point.

He reaches around and unties my blue satin ribbon, and my hair flies around my face. Then he fastens it around my eyes, obscuring my vision. Now I'm completely blind, having to rely on all my other senses such as sound and touch.

I can feel his blood-red eyes all over me as his cruel gaze rakes my flesh, and I think I'm going to combust at any moment.

What's with the hold-up? Fuck me already.

A smirk curls my lips. "Bring it on, psycho."

Madoc stills at the insult, and I wait with bated breath as he decides his next move. My heartbeat thumps inside my skull as sweat drips down my neck, and this is it: the moment I've been waiting for.

What will he do to me first?

In one swift motion, he tears at my dress with one of his sharp claws, and a breeze wafts against my naked breasts. My nipples pebble in the cold room as my monster doesn't take his eyes off me.

Sweat drips between my breasts, and I feel his burning eyes tracking its movement down my body.

Pushing my chest out, I offer up my body to him, hoping he will take the bait. Yet instead of devouring my breasts with those sharp teeth, he tears at my panties, setting my pussy free so he can

just... stare.

The brute.

“So wet...” he croons, leaning down to run his finger over my folds, and the wet sounds of my pussy reach my ears.

I pant for breath when his claw grazes the tender nub of my sex, and Madoc stops. “You like it when I touch you there with my claw?”

I nod my head, too delirious to form words.

“So be it.”

Dipping a finger inside further, he finds my clitoris and grazes it ever so slightly. Not enough to make me bleed, but just enough to give me insurmountable pleasure.

Lights flash in my eyes as a shudder works its way up my spine. I yank on my chains, pulling them taut when he drags an orgasm straight from my pussy.

Madoc doesn't stop. He continues to caress me with that merciless claw, making me yelp when he grazes a little too hard. Pleasure ripples throughout my body when he cuts the sensitive skin, making my arms and legs tremble.

Fuck me. I'm getting off to the sensation of pain.

Madoc pulls back out of me, reaching his claw up to my mouth, and now I taste myself on his claw.

“You taste that, my beauty? That's all you. You smell fucking fantastic. If only you realized just how sexy you are...”

He continues to caress my mouth, spreading my slick over my lips until it's absorbed by the skin, and then he steps back to admire his work.

My chains rattle above as I hang from the wall buck-naked, shaking and covered in sweat, and I've never known such pleasure. I truly am vulnerable. Even if I wanted to escape, I couldn't.

Totally at his mercy.

A squeak sounds from my lips when he presses his claw to my chest, and my ribcage rises and falls as he decides whether to stab me or not.

That claw could easily puncture my ribs like a knife, and just maybe I won't survive this torture after all.

I throw my head back and moan once he drags his claw further down my chest, tearing at my skin ever so slightly, and now there's no mistaking the warm trickle of blood. It drips down my breasts, collecting at the apex of my thighs.

He cut me with his claw, yet I hardly care. In fact, I enjoy it. The pain sets my nerve endings on fire, and now every atom of my being seems to sing as he teases his claw around my pussy.

My hips buck into his hand, and he chuckles, stepping back again to admire his work. I bet I look like pure carnage right now, a streak of red running from my breasts to my pussy, and it's like he's marked me somehow.

I just hope it doesn't scar.

“Now, my beauty... ready for the *fun* part?”

Heat flushes throughout my body, and then a drop of sweat runs down the groove of my spine. The anticipation is killing me.

I lick my lips and say, “Yes.”

He almost purrs in satisfaction. “That's my beauty...”

Without warning, he extends his tongue and licks the seam of my pussy. I open my mouth, throwing my head back against the wall as an orgasm crashes through my body, and I cry out in pleasure once his forked tip finds my clitoris.

Fuck. Does he have a forked penis too?

I bloody hope so.

Again and again, he makes me release, and every time I trip right over the edge, falling straight into the abyss. I don't ever want to crawl back out. I could gladly be chained to this wall forever.

When he's done with my pussy, he licks my body, cleaning away the trail of blood he left with his claw. Then that long, forked tongue finds my mouth. He slips inside, running the tip over the inside of my teeth.

I'm in pure ecstasy.

He slurps his tongue back out from my mouth, watching me for some time, and all I can do is hang there, trying to catch my breath.

My body has never felt so spent as I shake in my chains, and I wonder when he is going to set me free.

I want to touch him, feel the grainy texture of his skin as I run my fingers over his eight pack.

Madoc unclasps my wrists, and I stumble to the ground. He catches me in his arms, cradling me to his solid chest, and I listen to the sound of his heartbeat.

It's beating fast and there's no denying it.

This monster has fallen in love with me.

And I think I am falling for him too.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

STEAM SEEPS OUT FROM beneath the bathroom door as I curse under my breath. What's that human doing? She's been in there for nearly an hour!

I bang on the door. "Hey, sunshine. Hurry up! There's a line out here."

There's isn't, but I'm just making a point. There *could* be a line, yet little miss *sunshine* couldn't give two shits as she uses up all the hot water.

Who takes an hour to have a shower anyway? She really is lapping up the life of luxury, isn't she? Our so-called mate.

Could Belle be the one to take us back to the Abyss? Enzo seems to think so, and Madoc *definitely* agrees with that sentiment.

I'm not sure about Nero. I know my kid brother likes her too as I've seen the way he looks at her, but he's too cool to admit his feelings. He's not unlike me.

Regardless of my feelings toward her, I will not tolerate her blatant misuse of hot water. Nero has dishes to do after all, and if he can't do the dishes, then he gets extra angsty, and I'm sick of his glum face.

"Did you hear me in there? Time's up! You've had your fun."

The last thing I want to think about is her having *fun* in the shower, the hot water dripping down her smooth, alabaster curves, and I grunt, trying to think of something else.

I know; Madoc's bare ass. That should be enough to steer my thoughts in another direction. I wish I could say that I haven't seen my younger brother's naked ass, but since he loves mooning me so much, I have no problems imagining it.

Still, it's better than thinking about *her* naked.

"In a minute!" she yells from inside the bathroom, and the audacity.



She is our prisoner, not our guest. She should know her place!

I wrap my hand around the door handle and squeeze tightly. Just one tug and I will have this door ripped from its frame.

“I will give you a count to three. One, two—”

There comes a wet slipping sound next, and then a sharp yelp as the woman slaps the tiles, and I don't think twice. I kick the door open, rushing to her side.

I find her crumpled on the shower floor, cradling her foot, and the daggers she sends me could impale my concrete heart. The jets trickle down on her head, soaking her hair and skin, and my mind halts.

I can't stop staring at her. Her once creamy skin is flushed red from the water, sending my head spinning in circles, and I wasn't prepared for this.

Regardless of my frustrations, she's injured and she needs my assistance. Yet she's stark fucking naked.

I guess that's what I get for being so goddam impatient.

Enzo was right; I do need to control my anger.

She shifts, wincing as she adjusts her position, and my heart stings when I realize she's hurt. I close my eyes, sucking in a deep breath. The steam clears my sinuses, helping me think a little straighter. “Can you stand?”

Belle tries standing, but she soon slips on the tiles again. “No. I think I sprained my ankle.”

Well, fuck me and my entire life and soul. It looks like I'm going to have to assist her after all.

I did not sign up for this.

Kneeling down, I try to get a look at her injured ankle, but she flinches away from my touch. I back off, hating the wary expression she wears on her pretty face, and I don't want her to look at me like that.

I want her to look at me the way she looks at my psychopath of a brother.

I hold up my hands as a peace offering, and she gazes at my claws. So I retract them, and they disappear into my fingers.

“See? No claws. I'm not going to hurt you, sunshine.”

Belle regards me again carefully, chewing her bottom lip. Then she sighs and allows me to lift her from the shower.

The hot water soaks us both as our faces are inches apart, and she just stares at me. I raise a brow, but it's not as if she can see my expression. I'm just a shadow to her.

“I can see your face,” she states matter of factly, and a hush spreads over the room, the only sound the spurting jets.

I’m not sure what’s supposed to happen next. Time seems to hold still as Belle and I gaze into each other’s eyes. She glances at my lips, and my pulse beats louder.

Slowly, she leans her head closer, kissing me tentatively, and to my surprise, I don’t push her away. The water from the shower drips between us, and I can no longer think straight.

It must be the steam messing with my mind, but I lean into her kiss, reaching my clawed hand around to caress the back of her head, and she groans against my lips. Her tongue slips into my mouth, and when I suck it, she strengthens the kiss, pressing all of her weight against me.

Her soaked breasts push against my chest, and it seems our hearts beat as one now. I can feel her heartbeat vibrating through my body, and I’ve never been so sure of anything then.

She *is* my mate. This kiss has only confirmed that, and I don’t want to let her go ever again.

Madoc is just going to have to learn to share because she’s mine too.

My sunshine.

It’s only when she flinches that I finally stop, remembering then to my horror that she’s still injured. All because of me.

Lifting her up gently, I nestle her against my chest, cocooning her with my wings, and she’s as light as a feather. Then I carry her to her room, placing her down on the bed dripping wet where I can assess her foot.

She doesn’t appear to be too injured, but I will call Enzo up later to confirm.

Right now I just want her all to myself.

“Does it still hurt?” I ask, pointing at her leg.

Belle winces, tucking herself in beneath the sheets. “L-like a bitch...”

I chuckle at her response, and I think I could fall for this woman.

Now I lay down beside her, pressing her head against me, and she uses my chest as a pillow. She soon falls asleep, and I watch her until the sun goes down, wondering how I ever lived without her.

My perfect ray of sunshine.

Yeah, I’m way in too deep.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

## Belle

MADOC AND GREY ARE at odds with one another. It seems they have both claimed me as their mate, and I wonder how long it will be until a fight breaks out.

I bet it will be like the clash of the titans, the opera music playing in the background and everything. Trust me, that is *not* going to happen. There is enough of me to go around, so they need to grow up and learn to share.

They escort me through the castle gardens. There's not much to see as everything is desolate, just like the lands around our village, and I try not to despair.

Maybe when the curse has finally lifted, and they have returned to their homeland, we can bring life back to the world.

It truly has gone. The birds no longer sing in the trees, and I wonder if it had all been a part of the enchantresses' grand master plan. Why did she doom them to live in the human world? It makes no sense. Who was she and what did my monsters ever do to her?

My monsters... It's strange that I refer to them as *mine* now.

I find an arbor beside a dried-up pond, gazing at the muddy pile wistfully. Dead trees and flowers surround us, and it really is bleak. I just wish I could see the sun again, and the green of the grass. I haven't seen the blue sky in five years.

As I crane my neck, I'm greeted with a thick blanket of clouds, and it's a miracle that humans have survived without sunlight for so long.

The darkness is only an illusion. It warps our minds and convinces us that the sun has disappeared, and I give an involuntary shiver.

Madoc senses my shift in mood and leans down before me. He's too big to sit on the arbor after all.

His wide, red eyes flicker as he watches me concerned, and I gaze at his face. His features are still blurred, but with each passing day, I am starting to see more of him.

I've certainly felt enough of him. And now I can't help but envision myself licking his solid abs, and I bet he would *love* that.

He's always licking me after all. It's about time I returned the favor.

"Are you all right my beauty?" he asks.

Grey gripes behind us. "Will you stop *calling* her that? It's cringy."

Please, like sunshine is any better; I'm no cartoon, fairy tale princess like Snow White. I don't exude feel-good sunny vibes

Madoc snaps, jerking his head around to glare at his big brother. "You *dare* insult the name I gave my beauty..."

I give Grey a pointed look this time. "Yeah, show some respect, Grey. Besides, it's not like sunshine is any less lame."

I giggle, and both monsters watch me curiously. Madoc cocks his head to the side, and he does look precious when he gazes at me like that.

He's almost childlike in his mannerisms, yet he's all psychotic monster when we're alone in the bedroom, or in the West Wing tower.

The memory of our time together still sets my nerves on fire, and I have to squeeze my thighs lest I dampen my panties.

Grey stiffens as he senses my arousal, and now he looms above me, his shadow swallowing up my form.

I really am tiny when compared to them. It *thrills* me...

"Should we go somewhere more private, sunshine?"

I glance back and forth between the two of them, wondering how this is going to work. Will they cooperate and learn to share me, or will they fight like a pair of dogs over a slab of meat?

I guess I'm the meat in that analogy.

I rise from the arbor, and I don't even need to ask. Grey sweeps me up in his arms, then lifts his wings, and now we soar into the sky.

Madoc snaps behind us. "Hey! Where are you taking my beauty?"

The crazed psycho follows behind us in shadow form. Once we land on the balcony outside my room, he materializes again, snatching me away from Grey.

He presses me to his chest protectively, covering me with his tendrils. “Ask me the next time you go flying off with my mate, Grey!”

Grey snorts, shoving him off me as he leads me to my room. My heart pounds in excitement. “I think you mean *our* mate, little brother. She belongs to both of us.”

Madoc’s still seething when Grey pushes the glass doors aside, and now he leads me to the bed, laying me down on my back.

He covers me with the entire span of his colossal body, pressing me down into the mattress, and I can’t move. All the while, he trails his claw softly down the center of my face. He runs the tip down the slope of my nose and brushes it over my lips. Then he reaches my chin and neck until he stops at my heaving breasts.

He tears a hole in my dress. I’m going through an awful lot of clothes lately. They were loaned to me from Enzo, but maybe it’s best that I walk around naked now.

Well, I would if I could. But I’m only mated to two of these monsters after all.

Enzo and Nero have yet to woo me. I’m not even sure if the latter is interested in me at all. He’s too taciturn, and he only seems to care about doing the dishes, or sweeping the dust from all the rooms.

Grey hooks a claw beneath my bodice, tearing at the strings, and soon my breasts spill free. They stop breathing as they get their fill. Air tickles at the sensitive skin of my nipples, which grow taut in the absence of cloth.

Heavy breaths escape me, making my breasts rise and fall with the movement of my lungs.

A creepy giggle rattles inside Madoc’s throat. “Remove a little more of her dress, brother...”

Grey sneers, giving me a full view of that shark tooth grin. “With pleasure, baby bro.”

The monster rips at a few more strings, and soon the upper garment of my dress comes loose, leaving me in just the skirt.

While I loved the dress, I have to agree that it’s better off. It was a pretty sky blue, just like my satin ribbon.

My chest is finally exposed as both monsters stare at my breasts, and I wonder when they will do something. That’s when Grey rises from the bed, offering me to Madoc, and my heart pumps faster when I see the crazy gleam in his flaming eyes.

He climbs on top of me, enveloping me in his shadows, and again I don’t move. I love the feeling of being absolutely helpless. It’s hot as fuck, and I’d gladly become a slave for these monsters.

I’d even walk around in shackles if it so much as helped me get my release.

Madoc flips me around on my stomach and removes my skirt. A soft breeze wafts against my bare ass, making me shiver, and when he slips his tongue between the wet folds of my pussy, I groan.

I love it when he enters me from behind like that. His forked tongue hits just the right bundle of nerves, and it's enough to send me straight to hyperspace.

I'm about to go to the next dimension; wanna join me?

“Hey, who said you get first dibs?” Grey complains, and Madoc sneers at him.

“I did. I was the first to answer her beckoning call after all. And besides, you *gave* her to me. Changed your mind now? You gonna fight me for her?”

Grey growls, baring his teeth, and now he nestles down on the bed in front of me. Are they going to play a game of tug of war?

They know that could possibly kill me, right?

Monsters.

As I said, there is plenty of me to go around.

The former grouch gazes into my eyes, and I meet his round green orbs. Well, I suppose he is still a grouch, but not so much these days.

“So, how do you want to proceed, sunshine? Your call. Who gets to be the first to claim your pussy.”

I suppose I hadn't thought of that, and honestly, I don't know how I'm going to take any of their cocks. I've felt and seen Madoc's, but I haven't had one of their monster dicks inside of me yet.

It was only a matter of time, after all.

Grey continues. “Unless you don't want one of us to claim you. The curse doesn't say we have to have sex. We just need to win your heart.”

My heart bangs against my ribs, and I pause a moment to think it through. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to find out. Also, I want to get laid.

It's been several years since I got any action, and even then it was awful. The backseat of an old car with some random fuck boy. Nothing special.

That had been the night I'd lost my virginity. Two years had passed since the monsters took over, and I was eighteen. I'd wanted to live a little.

I hope that has no bearing on what happens between me and my monsters. Even though four years have passed, and things are probably a little tight down there again from years of inactivity, the fact remains...

I'm no virgin.

Madoc doesn't seem to care though as he runs a finger up and down my folds, spreading my slick around my pussy.

I didn't know I was going to be a part of some prophecy back then. So what does it matter whether I saved myself for them?

As they said, it's not about my pussy. It's about my heart.

Madoc grabs my hips, raising my ass off the bed as he lifts me higher. My face remains by Grey's lap, and I think I've already decided.

The *psycho* will be the one to claim my pussy. What can I say? I have a thing for the crazy ones.

The grouch can have my mouth.

Madoc slathers my pussy with his forked tongue, making sure I'm nice and wet for his big cock, and my body trembles. Grey removes his pants, watching me warily as he wonders if I'm ready, but he has no need to be concerned.

I'm a big girl; I can handle myself.

A gasp escapes me when I feel the tip of Madoc's head along my entrance, and his length burns me like a brand. I bite my lip, savoring the sensation of him against me as he teases my sex, making me shiver in delight.

Now it's Grey's turn. He frees his cock, and now his length bounces before me. I can't stop staring. He's big. At least fifteen inches but it's not the length that I have to worry about. It's the thickness.

The monster has ridges running up and down the sides of his dick, and the blood rushes through my head when I envision it inside my mouth.

I'm going to love running my tongue along those grooves.

Grey tips my head up with a claw, and now those green eyes narrow like a cat's as he gives off a soft purr. "Ready, sunshine? I'm big, after all. Think your mouth can take me?"

"Don't forget me either, beauty. Do you think your pussy is up to the challenge? I'm going to stretch you so hard, you'll be seeing stars!"

Well, I do like stars.

I lick my lips, offering Grey a seductive smirk. "Bring it on."

The monster smiles, and now he grabs a hold of my cheeks, digging his claws into my scalp as he presses his dick to my mouth. The heat of his head caresses my lips, and I take several deep breaths before I open wide, letting him in.

I'm not even halfway down his length when I feel maxed out and holy fuck; he really is big.



I just hope Madoc has an easier time behind me. That's a hole designed for penetration after all, but can it take the entire length of a monster? I hope so.

Madoc slips inside, setting my nerves on fire as he stretches my pussy beyond its limits, and just as he promised, I see stars.

I groan against Grey's dick, and the monster makes the most erotic growl that I ever heard, one that goes straight to my pussy. He fucks my mouth in earnest, plunging in and out, and Madoc matches his pace.

When one goes in, the other goes out, and aren't I a lucky girl getting fucked from both ends.

I've never felt so alive, and it won't be long until one of them drags an orgasm from me. My skin prickles, sending goose flesh all over my body. It hardens my breasts, which bounce with each of Madoc's thrusts.

I reach up and grab the base of Grey's dick, running my mouth up and down his length, and he grunts in pleasure. He comes when I squeeze a little harder, and the moment his seed fills my mouth, my senses explode.

Grey tastes sweet. I've only ever tasted one dick, but it had been bitter and salty. Yet this one tastes just like sinful chocolate.

My own release follows soon after his, and I finally come undone as they thrust back and forth, filling me to the brim.

Madoc stills behind me, his hips jerking erratically, and then he fills me up with his own seed. I feel it all the way at my uterus, and will he get me pregnant?

It's not worth thinking about. I'm just going to live in the moment.

"My turn..."

Madoc pulls out of me, pushing Grey away from my mouth, and now he gazes down at my face hungrily, his eyes burning as hot as fire.

Those flaming eyes scorch me as they linger on my lips, watching Grey's seed dripping down my chin, and I know he wants to mark my mouth too.

Taking a hold of my face, he slips his dick inside my mouth as Grey takes my backside, and now I run my tongue along the prominent ridges of Madoc's cock as he releases string after string of hot cum.

Madoc tastes spicy whereas Grey tastes sweet, and sweet and spice? How ironic.

His seed burns my mouth, but I swallow every last drop. It spills down my throat like fire, making my body glow, and I don't think I can take the heat anymore.

I scream as I come apart around Grey's dick, clenching around his hard length. The monster responds in kind, grabbing a fistful of my hair as he tugs my head back, and now I'm blinded by shooting stars.

Hot waves of pleasure ripple through my body, tearing me apart atom by atom, and soon I can't even feel my own legs anymore.

When they finally pull out, I collapse onto the bed, gasping for breath. My heart pounds, vibrating through the mattress, and I can't move for the life of me.

Did I die and go to heaven? It sure feels like it.

This is pure, fucking bliss.

Every inch of my skin is soaked with sweat. It drenches the sheets beneath me, which stick to my flesh, but I'm too drunk on endorphins to care.

Someone flips me around, and I peer up into Madoc's eyes. The fire has gone, leaving behind a pair of cooling embers, and I've never felt so much love.

It spreads through me, reaching my fingers and toes, and I feel like I'm floating upon a cloud.

"I... I love you. The *both* of you..."

They freeze at my confession, but as I said, I'm too drunk on hormones to care. The castle stirs next, and I swear some kind of spell has been lifted, but I'm too tired to care.

So I close my eyes, readying myself for sleep.

Grey pulls me up, nestling me against his body, and I sleep against his chiseled chest as he cocoons us both in his wings. All the while, Madoc plants kisses up and down my back, licking the sweat as he goes, and I wish I could stay this way forever.

My monsters and me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

## *Nero*

ENZO THROWS A SURPRISE ball for Belle, and I wait while she gets ready in her room. The news just came out of the blue, but it's all a part of Enzo's attempt at winning her heart.

Madoc and Grey have already won it; I felt the whole house stirring the other day when she confessed she loved them, and it's not helping my anxiety.

As a result, I've been cleaning at a much faster pace, scrubbing the same spot over and over in an attempt to distract my thoughts, but it's fruitless.

I have to win Belle's heart. Otherwise, my brothers and I won't be able to return to the Abyss.

Enzo is already running up in the lead. He already gave her a library, and now he is throwing a special ball just for her.

Shit. What can I offer her? Clean sheets?

If winning Belle's heart was a race, then I'm definitely losing.

"How do I look?" she says, stepping out from behind the privacy screen, and I do a double-take.

What do I say? She looks like a vision.

Her dress is a shimmering gold, cinched at the waist with a pair of long, elegant gloves. There are intricate rose patterns embroidered in the material. The skirt flows as she spins around, and I try to remember where I am, what I'm supposed to be doing.

That's right. I'm the one to escort her down to the ballroom. She will be dancing with each one of us, and I think my oldest brother has given me the honors of being her chaperone to give me a chance in the race.

I should thank him later.

I just can't believe how beautiful she looks. Her long, luxurious brown hair has been tied up, showcasing that perfect heart-shaped face, and my heart beats a little faster.

Sweat beads on my forehead, and I'm just glad she can't see my face. She can see Madoc and Grey a hell of a lot better now, but Enzo and I are still a mystery to her.

I don't want to get sweat on my three-piece suit. We've all dressed up for the occasion. My suit is a deep purple to match my eyes. Grey wears green and Madoc wears red, while my oldest brother Enzo will be wearing orange.

I extend a clawed hand, and Belle's eyes track the movement. My claws aren't extended but if they were, she would see that they were polished and unchipped.

Not that it makes much of a difference, I suppose, but for Belle, I can be the clean one.

Smiling, she takes my hand, allowing me to lead her downstairs to the ballroom. When we reach the top of the stairs, we find my brothers waiting for us at the bottom, and all their eyes go to Belle immediately.

I may as well be invisible, but it's not like I blame them.

You can't help but look at her.

This is the part where I have to let her go, giving her over to one of my brothers. Of course, Madoc will get the honors. Since he was the first to lay a claim on her, it's understandable, but when he steps closer, I'm tempted to bare my fangs and growl at him.

*Mine. Belle is mine...*

But that would be terribly uncouth of me. I'm better than that. I'm not a brute like Grey, or insane like Madoc.

I have standards.

It's funny that Belle fell for the most uncivilized of us monsters first, leaving the more civilized beings like me and Enzo in the dark.

She must have a thing for reckless and insane.

"My beauty..." Madoc says as we reach the bottom of the stairs. "You look good enough to eat."

I roll my eyes. There are better ways to express how lovely she looks. While she does look delectable in that golden dress, I would have chosen much more elegant words.

Belle takes his proffered hand, and I wonder how much of him she can see. I bet she can see the way he licks his lips with his long lizard tongue, imagining all the ways he has tasted her, and I grumble in dissatisfaction.

I'm still a shadow to her.

I stand on the sidelines with Enzo and Grey, and the former edges a little closer to me.

"How are you feeling, little brother?"

I sigh in answer, watching how Madoc swirls Belle around the polished ballroom floor, and he's not a bad dancer. It's a good thing he grew up at court. If Madoc had been any other run-of-the-mill monster, then he would be even more uncivilized. Even more uncouth.

It's not even worth thinking about.

"Splendid," I lie.

Enzo studies me for a while, his bright orange eyes tapering as he assesses me carefully, and he truly does look regal. With that long lion's mane and those majestic horns, it's no wonder he was appointed the head king. He is the oldest too, but he's truly a formidable force.

Belle should have no problem falling for him.

While I may be the second youngest, I really am the weakest link. While I'm a skilled spymaster, I am not as strong as my brothers.

What the hell do I have to offer Belle? A clean house?

I really have to up my game.

Grey scoffs at my response, and he needs to get that throat looked at.

"You got a hairball stuck in your throat, brother?" I ask, keeping my voice neutral.

The former strategist chuckles. "Just admit you have feelings for her, baby bro."

I keep my lips sealed shut. Grey guffaws, causing Belle to glance over at us, and I will punch him in that stupid face.

Enzo exhales, placing a hand on my shoulder. "You take my dance, little brother."

I peer his way. "Why? You need to win her heart as much as I do."

My horned brother sighs. "I do, but I would rather you won her heart first. I will get there eventually... these things take time."

My eyes expand. Just before I can reply, Madoc and Belle's dance ends, and it's Grey's turn with her now.

I will be next.

Shit.

I need to clean.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## Belle

I FINISH DANCING WITH Grey, and to my surprise, it's not Enzo who steps up next, but Nero. He holds out a hand. "May I have this dance?"

I stifle a snort. He really is like an otherworldly gentleman. It's funny how different each brother is. Enzo is pretty similar too in his mannerisms, but Nero is shy and reserved.

So I take his proffered hand, letting him guide me around the ballroom as we twirl along to the music. I normally have two left feet, but after a few lessons from Enzo, I was able to get my footing right on time for tonight. I'm still no pro. Honestly, I don't do balls and fancy dresses. That was the *old* Belle, before the monsters changed our world.

I did have a school prom once, but that was a few months before the monsters took over, back when the world was normal.

How times have changed. I would do anything to go back, worrying about frivolous things like dresses, makeup, and having a date at the prom.

I didn't have a date; I went alone. I was not popular at school on an account of being so utterly different from the other kids. They used to laugh and tease me; it's any wonder they didn't throw a bucket of pig's blood on my head like poor Carrie.

No one would dare tease me now. Well, not to my face. The villagers always gossiped behind my back, but I just turned the other way.

They started to respect me more once I ditched the books for guns, and that shut them all up in no time.

Don't bite the hand that feeds you after all.

Yeah, I'm odd, but who cares. I'd rather be different than like everyone else.

Why blend into the crowd?



Nero is tense, and I try to discern his emotions by gazing into his violet eyes. I still have yet to see the face that I saw on the portrait. Enzo is still mostly hidden to me, but I'm starting to see more and more of him every day.

I finally saw an outline of that aquiline nose, but I can't see anything of Nero's face. I know he's the most boyish of them. His face was rather impish on the portrait, and the color of a twilight sky.

I think purple is my second favorite color after blue. It's feminine without being outrightly so.

Our dance ends, and I expect Enzo to stride over toward us, but he remains on the sidelines. I peer over, wondering what will happen next.

Enzo places an arm around Madoc and Grey, leading them out of the ballroom. "Well, let's go."

Wait, what? They're leaving?

My monsters hesitate at first, but when they glance at Nero, they give in and allow their brother to lead them away. Madoc waves at me sadly as he exits the room, and the poor monster can't be without me for five minutes.

Now it's just me and Nero, and a tense silence passes over us. What do I say? I have hardly spent any time with him. All he seems to do is clean and fuss about a pileup of dishes, and why does he feel a need to clean so much?

It must be some form of OCD, and I want to reach out and comfort him, but I hesitate.

"Well, should we go for a walk?" Nero offers, and I nod, letting him lead me outside the wide balcony doors.

We come out onto the terrace, gazing out over the desolate gardens of the castle. A shame. It could have been beautiful, but instead, shadows mask the world, and nothing can grow to its true potential anymore.

Nero and I stand side by side. The monster drums his perfectly polished claws on the balustrade of the balcony, and how does he get them to look so shiny?

They look better than mine. I haven't had a manicure in years.

Does he have a manicure set in his room? He really is a strange monster. Grey's and Madoc's claws are jagged and splintered, and Grey even has dirt stuck inside his.

"So, how are you enjoying life at the castle?" he asks, his voice flat, and I take a moment to respond.

It's really hard to know what he's thinking. He speaks without inflection, and of course, his face is still obscured by shadow.

"It's been quite wonderful. Well, apart from the whole *dungeon* thing. It's just nice to have hot running water again."

That was why I spent an hour in the shower the other week. I hadn't had a hot shower in five years. So sue me.

Madoc drums his fingers faster. "That's great. It's important to stay clean after all."

I nearly snort at his response, but I think better of it. I'm not sure if he would be offended. Cleaning is pretty important to him. It seems to be some form of coping method.

I decide to get a little personal now, asking him what he was like back at the Abyss. I know Madoc was a general and Grey a strategist, but what did Nero do? What was his skillset?

"What were you like back then?"

He seems to know what I mean by *back then* as he clears his throat. "The same. You wouldn't find a speck of dust in our old castle. This world has far more superior cleaning supplies, so I will most likely take some back with me when we return home..."

That's if they do. Only two of them have won my heart so far, and I think I'm getting warmer with Enzo, but Nero is still a stranger to me.

I have no idea what he is about at all.

"Also, I was a spymaster. An important job at any court."

I can imagine with all those backstabbers and traitors trying to steal his throne. All four of them were kings, and is that normal in the Abyss? To have more than one ruler?

"Do you miss it there?"

Nero doesn't reply at first. He continues to gaze over the grounds, but then he sighs, meeting my eyes, and there's no denying his grief.

"I do, but honestly... it wouldn't be the same without you, Belle. We were pretty miserable even before we were banished, and these last five years haven't been easy. Even if we do manage to win you over, what happens then? Do we have to give you up? We're of two different worlds..."

The reality of his words press down on me hard, and I suppose I hadn't really thought it through properly. What *will* happen once they return to their world? Will I fall in love with four monsters, only to have them leave?

I agreed to help them so we could break the curse. Their banishment only brought darkness to my world, so of course, I want to do what I can to save my people. But at the expense of getting my heart

broken?

I think I finally understand why Nero is so distant. He doesn't want to fall in love with someone only to have to let them go, and it's just not fair.

The enchantress will pay for what she has done.

Carefully, I reach across and squeeze his hand, and the size difference is alarming. His whole palm encompasses my head.

Nero squeezes back, and his eyes flicker to my lips. There's no denying the desire burning in those violet eyes, and the world seems to freeze as he makes his move.

He grabs my face with his clean hand, applying a slight pressure with his polished claw, then leans in slowly. I feel his breath against my lips, and all I can do is stand there with my head tipped back and my eyes closed.

Now all I can hear is my heartbeat.

"I'm sorry... I... I can't..."

To my utter disappointment, Nero floats away, and I'm left kissing the air. I don't bother chasing him because I get it. He doesn't want to get his heart broken.

It's just that I think I gazed a little of his boyishly handsome face beneath the shadows, and his portrait didn't do him justice at all.

Nothing about this life is fair.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I FIND BELLE ALONE on the balcony, and now we both gaze out at the desolate grounds as I stand by her side.

Something is troubling her.

I take it she spent some time with my little brother, but his absence only confirms my worst fears. He rejected her because he doesn't want his heart broken.

I get it. The curse doesn't say what will happen once we find a woman to fall in love with all four of us, but the end game for me was just getting us back to our old court.

Who knows what has happened to our old kingdom. It could simply be in ruins without us to rule there.

We have to get back. No matter what it costs.

We are not of this world, and day by day, I feel a little more of myself slipping away. One day, I will become nothing but pure shadow, and I can't allow that to happen.

At least Madoc and Grey are becoming tangible again, but time is running out for me and Nero.

The petals are dropping off the rose at a much faster pace these days. We can't afford to be lenient, but winning a woman's heart is not an easy feat.

It's like planting a seed. It takes time for the flower to fully blossom, and that is why I won't rush.

I want Belle's feelings to come naturally.

"What is it, Belle?" I ask.

She sighs, peering up at my orange eyes. "Everything. I'm just so confused. I was prepared to do all that I can to get you and your brothers back home, but... it's harder than I realized."

I let her words sink in, and it comes to my attention that she isn't happy with the arrangement. We took her against her will, pretty much. Although I tried to assure her that it was her decision, she is

not really here of her own volition.

She is our prisoner.

She doesn't actually owe us anything. The only reason she agreed to help us was so that she could set her people free, bringing light back to the world.

The human world has been in complete shambles since we took over. Not a speck of light remains, and it really is dreary.

My species are used to the darkness, but not humans. They need the life-giving nourishment of the sun.

The sun never actually went anywhere. The darkness is a mere illusion. Hence why they have managed to survive, but it's all psychological. They're sick as a result of their stress, becoming fewer in numbers.

No one can blame Belle for wanting to play the part of savior. Absolutely no one. She truly is noble.

And I guess that's why I am starting to fall for her.

She's a good person, and she deserves more than the hand that fate has dealt her.

"You're not happy here, are you?"

Belle glances away, and another melancholy sigh leaves her lips. "I am, but... I miss my father. My friends. They're the reason why I am prepared to help you and your brothers. I want life to go back to the way it was. Everything was so much easier then, and I miss reality TV. I never thought I would, yet I do. I want *normality* again. I want to watch TV shows about rich and famous people with big butts and plastic faces again."

Big butts and plastic faces? Sounds awful, but whatever makes her happy.

She scoffs. "I used to criticize people who watched shows like that, being the more bookish type. It was the reason why I could never fit in. I just never liked things that other people did, but now I finally understand. It's just another form of escapism. It was the reason I read books growing up. I just wanted to read about other people's lives for once and escape my own reality. I always liked fantasy and adventure, but now I could do with the mundane, everyday shit from the days of old, and that is watching narcissistic celebrities wearing designer clothes and arguing about their boyfriends."

Again, I don't see the appeal. I'm not even sure what a 'celebrity' is. I think it was a human who was famous and appeared on those devices humans watched called a 'television'. She did mention TV shows.

“Well, I’m through with fantasy and adventure. It’s different when you’re actually *living* it. Give me boring Friday nights staying in again and watching anime. Damn, I miss anime too. Another reason why I could never fit in. I was such a nerd...”

A nerd? I’m not too familiar with the term, or what *Anna May* is, but I know what I have to do; I have to set her free.

It’s the only way forward. I know she will come back to us. She wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to help her people, but I also think she would come back for us too.

I know she has fallen for at least two of my brothers. I felt the castle shake the other day when she confessed to them.

But will two be enough to break the curse?

“Belle... I have decided to let you go. I know it’s the right thing to do.”

She whirls around, her mouth agape as she stares in wonder. “You’re letting me go?”

I heave a regretful sigh. “Yes. But I trust you will make the right decision. I know you will come back. Not only to help your people but to help us too. You’re a good person like that. It’s what I admire most about you.”

She says nothing, but I don’t miss the shine in her big hazel eyes. It’s hard to look at them, but I give her that respect, smiling as best as I can.

Hopefully, she can see the expression.

“Thank you. And I promise I will come back. Just give me a day. I need to see my father again, see if he’s all right. He’s probably worried about me.”

He probably is. I rather liked the old man, but there was a selfish reason why I had decided to hold on to him.

His knowledge of portals and other realms. A part of me hoped he could create a gateway to the Abyss, but science has no place here.

The curse is just too strong. The enchantress made it so we could never go back without the love of a stubborn woman, and that means no shortcuts.

Belle leans up and grabs my cheek, planting a gentle peck on my lips. I deepen the kiss, lifting her up as I place her on the balustrade, and now we embrace.

My cock reacts to her body heat, and for a moment I don’t want to let her go. But I have to.

Being with us and loving us; it all has to be Belle’s choice.

She reaches up and caresses my horns, running her fingers over the base, and I shudder at the intimate touch.

I'm very sensitive there after all.

"I'll be back, I promise. You haven't seen the last of me."

I smile tightly "I trust you, Belle. Now go. Don't worry about the others. I will explain when they return."

I told my brothers to give Belle a moment with Nero, but since Nero has gone now, it's up to me to help her.

Belle lifts the golden ruffles of her skirt and rushes out of the ballroom. She continues out the front door and then across the courtyard, the tangles moving to allow her passage, and now I watch until she's nothing more than a yellow dot on the horizon.

I know she will make it home safely. And I trust she will return to us.

Then I can win her heart the right way.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# *Belle*

I ARRIVE AT THE cottage to find all the lights on, banging on the door. “Father! It’s me, Belle. Open up!”

The door swings open, and to my surprise, it’s Grady who answers. His eyes light up when he sees me. “Belle... you’re okay...”

I push inside the cottage, finding my dad coughing on the bed. I rush to his side, dropping to my knees. “Father...”

His old, weary eyes lift up to meet mine, and then they spark to life. “Belle... is it really you?”

“Yes. I’m back. I just wanted to see you. How have you been?”

He grabs my face to make sure it truly is me, then pulls me in for a weak hug, patting me on the back. “I’m so glad you’re safe. I was worried about what those monsters would do to you.”

Well, they did many things, but it was all consensual. Yet my dad doesn’t have to know that.

I squeeze him back. “It’s fine. They let me go.”

Dad pulls away, holding me out at arm’s length. “They... let you go?”

I sigh. “Yes. But I’m going back.”

His face falls, and now he blinks rapidly as my words sink in. “You’re going back?!”

I rise, looking across the room at Grady, who’s as equally confused as my father. That’s when I peer down at my ball gown, realizing for the first time how crazy I must look. I definitely turned a few heads on the way here, that’s for sure.

“I have to go back. I promised. You see, I’m the only one who can get them back to their homeland. It’s too much to explain now, but if I can help them, then I can help everyone else. The human world can be restored.”

Both men watch me spellbound, and I should have also explained that the monsters aren't actually as evil as we thought. I suppose their letting me go would speak for itself, but there's no denying the confusion in their eyes. They must think I have gone insane.

Just before I explain things further, there comes a banging on the door, and I rush across the room to open it. My stomach roils when I find Gustave on the other side, surrounded by a large number of the village.

They look like a mob. An *angry* mob, and that's not good.

"So you made it out of the beasts' castle alive," Gustave states matter of factly, and I narrow my eyes.

"Yes."

The pretty boy grits his teeth, and how can anyone honestly find him handsome? Especially when he snarls like that.

"So, you *failed* to kill them..."

I grind my teeth. "I didn't fail to do anything. In fact, I managed to befriend them and help them find a way to return—"

Gustave completely ignores me and turns to the villagers. "Bullshit. It appears she has been brainwashed. I knew this would happen. I heard they have their ways with women. Those monsters have poisoned your mind, Belle."

I growl, storming out of the cottage after him, and I must look so insane in my golden ball gown right now. "They haven't done such a thing! It was *my* choice to help them. They never asked to be here. They were banished, and all they want to do is return home, so I'm going to help them."

Gustave glances back at me, fire and jealousy burning in his perfect blue eyes. "Help them *how*?"

I stumble for the right words, wondering how I can avoid the part about the curse and how I need to fall in love with all four of them. No doubt pretty boy will get envious. He's a narcissist and always has been, and if he can't have me, then no one else can.

So I keep my lips sealed, but my silence seems to tell Gustave everything he needs to know.

He sneers, swinging his hunting rifle over his shoulder. "Just as I thought. They've tainted you, Belle. Warped your mind and convinced you that you have *feelings* for them, and I won't stand for it. Do they think they can just steal our women? Ha! We must march to the beasts' castle tonight and kill them once and for all!"

Like *hell* I will let *that* happen!

I rush to Gustave, yanking his shoulder, but he shoves me away. I go flying onto my ass, and I hear Grady cursing behind me.

“Don’t you dare lay a hand on her!” he snaps, but the younger man ignores him too.

Gustave holds too much authority in the village and people will gladly march with him.

He’s the one warping people’s minds.

I scramble to my feet, holding my head high. “Well, good luck trying to kill them. Bullets don’t work on them, trust me. I tried and failed.”

Gustave marches through the crowd, and they move away from him like a school of fish from a hammerhead shark. “Exactly. You failed. But that’s where you and I differ, Belle. I *never* miss a shot. I will be the one to kill the beasts and become the true hero that our village, no, *humanity* needs. Lock them up. They’ve all been tainted by the beasts.”

He saunters off like the cocky prick he is, so self-assured, and I want to slap him across his perfectly molded face. But the crowd closes in on me and Grady, and it’s no use. They’re just going to mindlessly follow Gustave like a pack of sheep, and this hatred and fear will get us nowhere.

We need to learn to work with the beasts. That way we can all find peace and return our worlds back to their former glory.

“Gustave, you’re making a big mistake. This is madness! Please, listen to reason!”

Just as the door shuts us inside, I spy Gustave amongst the crowd, a smirk curving his face, and he’s never looked so hideous

“Yeah, well you should have thought about that the day you turned me down, Belle. I could have given you *everything*, but now look at you, stark raving mad. Just like your father in the end.”

The door slams shut, and I hear the villagers bolting us in outside. I don’t give up as I kick and scream, desperate to escape and stop Gustave.

He’s going to get himself killed, but I couldn’t give two shits about that. I’m just worried about how my monsters will react when they see a mob of humans marching to their castle, thinking that I had something to do with it.

That’s the last thing I want them to think. I never go back on my promises. If I said I would help, then I’ll help.

I will get them back to the Abyss, and I will restore the human world.

Even if I have to kill one of my own kind to achieve that.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## Madec

THE VILLAGERS APPROACH THE castle like a swarm of vicious bees, and I giggle in psychotic glee. Finally, some action. It's been getting dull around here these last few years.

I know that my beauty isn't amongst them. She would never send an angry mob on us. When Enzo said he let her go, at first I was livid. Both Grey and I screamed at our elder brother, but he told us to trust her.

Belle will return to us, and I hold on to that small ray of hope.

And if she doesn't return, so be it. We would just have to go on without her. I can make peace with that decision, but I won't deny that I will miss her.

But I want her to love us of her own accord. Not because she felt forced into a role.

I can't imagine the stress she must be going through, which is why I am elated that the villagers have just arrived.

It looks as if they are being led by the village idiot; the one who loves to sing about himself at the local tavern. I've peered into his dreams many times just for laughs.

The man is conceited, convinced that he is God's gift to women, and I can't wait to put a dent in that handsome face.

Who does he think he is, exactly? Some hero? Please. The only thing he seems to be good at is getting the sheep of the village to join him on this suicide mission.

No one can incite a mob like *Gustave*, after all.

Grey watches me warily from the corner of his eye as we gaze out at the approaching mob from a tower window, and I can't stop twitching. I'm just so excited at the prospect of a fight again. It fuels me, giving me life, and maybe I really am insane.

"How are you feeling, brother?"

Another raspy laugh escapes me, and he tenses. “Splendid. I was in the mood to wreck some shit up after all.”

Grey palms my shoulder and squeezes tightly. His claws dig into the skin. “Remember, they’re just human. They can’t hurt us. Their weapons are useless, so there’s no need to use brute force.”

Who said anything about force? I’ll be tormenting them emotionally, not physically.

I begin to tremble again, shaking in anticipation. I even begin to salivate at the thought of all those humans and their delicious emotions, and this is true torture.

Their mob mentality tastes like a gourmet meal right now, and it's just too much. They either think in black and white, letting their fears govern their logic, and humans truly are fools.

Enzo has forbidden us from making the first strike, but we can’t just let them invade the castle. It’s an invasion of our privacy.

Plus, they have pitchforks. Ooh, and flaming torches too.

“I... can’t help it,” I shake. “M-must defend the castle. M-must protect *mate*...”

She’s not even here, but I have a feeling they hurt her somehow, and that's when I extract my claws, raking them down the wall. They tear the wallpaper.

Nero will be pissed.

I will fuck up anyone who hurt my beauty.

The mob reaches the door at last. It looks like they have chopped down a tree and are using it to break inside the castle. My eyes roll back into my skull.

“Can we attack them now? This is pathetic!”

I was a war general; it’s demeaning to hide away from a bunch of puny humans, but Grey was the strategist. He's always been the most patient of us, and he's good at reading the details of a situation.

All I see is the color red. It’s the tone of my eyes, but that’s beside the point.

I have to attack.

With one last heave of the log, they smash through the door, and all goes quiet. Then voices clamor through the castle.

My heart pounds in my ears.

Surely, we can attack now?

Grey peers my way. “Ready, brother? Remember, stealth mode. Don’t let them see you.”

Oh, I won’t. They don’t need to see me for me to attack; I just need to peer into their minds.

We shift into our shadow forms, shooting down to the front foyer. There we spy a procession of humans gazing at our stuff, and it's a miracle they managed to get in at all.

They hacked through the thorns like they were nothing, and maybe we shouldn't take these creatures for granted.

They may be smarter than we realize.

The village idiot Gustave isn't amongst them, and he must have snuck off before we arrived. But that's okay. I know Enzo and Nero will take care of him.

I'll have my fun with his sheep instead. They'll rue the day they messed with the beasts.

A noodle-shaped man with knobbly knees passes me next, and I extend my tendrils, tearing through his mind.

The man stills as I fuck with his psyche, and when I'm done, he drops to the ground, twitching and most likely wishing he had never been born.

It's a skill of mine. I can pass on my insanity to another being. But even just a small bout of my crazy has the man writhing on the floor, and I don't think he will ever be the same again.

Oh, well.

That'll teach the others.

The humans scream when they spy him on the ground, jerking their heads around in search of the terror. They wield their pitchforks and torches, and classic.

They really are medieval.

"Ready, brother," Grey whispers from the shadows, and I smirk.

"Yes."

A few heartbeats pass. Then Grey shouts "Go!" and that's my cue.

I'm going to tear up shit.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## *Belle*

“**B**ELLE, IT’S NO USE... we’re trapped...”

I turn towards my father. He sits up on the bed, coughing and spluttering, but I won’t give up. I made a promise, after all. I told Enzo I would return after I saw my father, and now that I know that he’s safe and well, I can go back.

Unfortunately, I’m trapped, and I have no way out of the cottage. The villagers barricaded all the doors and windows.

“Did they really let you go?”

It’s Grady who speaks this time. I glance his way, releasing a sigh. “Yes. They wanted me to make a choice.”

My father is piqued now. “A choice about what?”

I don’t answer him. Instead, I place my throbbing forehead against the door, trying to think of a way out of this.

*Think, Belle, think.*

“You’ve fallen for those monsters, haven’t you?” says the wispy voice of my father, and I squeeze my eyes, peering his way before he gets any ideas.

“It’s not what you think. They didn’t taint me or poison my mind. Everything I feel for them is real...”

My father doesn’t look so convinced. However, his face does soften when he hears my words, and then he heaves a grave sigh. “You know, when I think about it... they never really harmed me. Not in the way I would have thought. Sure, they messed with my mind, but the leader, Enzo, was always gracious. He was more curious about me than anything, especially my work.”

I move closer. “Your work?”

Father meets my eyes, and I don't miss the crazy gleam that shimmers in his. He was always somewhat of an eccentric, dabbling where he shouldn't, and a shiver runs down my spine.

"My work with parallel universes. I almost created one gateway, but then the monsters took over and we lost everything."

Parallel universes? Was Enzo hoping that my father could create one to the Abyss? If so, they wouldn't even need me to break the curse.

But it all sounds like science fiction mumbo jumbo. Honestly, when had fiction become reality? There I was once upon a time, reading books about parallel universes and monster realms, and then the next thing I knew, it became reality.

As I said to Enzo, I'd do anything for the mundane again. Take me back to the days when the most riveting thing on television was a show about celebrities and their big asses.

"I have to get back to them. They need me... I don't think they will be so impervious to Gustave's bullet anymore. I... was *changing* them..."

Father's eyes spark. "Changing them how?"

"The more I spent time with them, the less shadowy they became."

My father gazes at me strangely, and I have no idea what's running through his mind. While he should be concerned for his daughter, there's no mistaking that excited twinkle in his eyes.

I know that look.

Just before I can probe him about his weird facial expression, there comes a sound outside, and I pick up on familiar voices.

"Belle. Grady? You in there?"

My heart picks up. It's old drunken Roger, and he's with Jacob and Derrick.

"We're here," I call out.

"Good," Derrick replies. "We're getting you out of there. This is bloody madness. The entire village has gone to attack the monsters. Are they out of their minds?!"

It appears they are, and they really have no idea what they're up against.

Finally, it looks as if things are turning in our favor.

I'll go back to the beasts and stop Gustave before he does something we all regret.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# Grey

I DROP THE HUMAN at my feet, watching as he curls up into a ball, sucking his thumb like a little babe, and it was almost too easy.

That's ten humans I have reduced to tears. They crouch on the floor, sobbing and wailing after I brought their most primal fears to life.

Most of them have basic fears, like spiders, heights, and clowns, but that last one was scared of commitment.

Whatever...

The poor woman across from me was afraid of getting her heart broken again after her asshole boyfriend cheated on her last summer, and I almost didn't want to go there.

Poor thing. I hope she realizes one day that not all men are douchebags like her ex-boyfriend, and it's just her fears holding her back from finding love again.

It looks as if I have gone soft after all, and I never thought I would see that day. I am sympathizing with a human.

When all this is over, I'm going to punch a concrete wall. That will rejuvenate my manliness and restore my system again.

Now it's time to find that cunt with the chiseled jaw. Gustave, or whatever his name is.

Damn, how I would love to put a permanent dent in his face.

I turn to my brother and holy fucking donkey balls.

A pile of writhing, jerking humans surrounds him as he infects them all with his insanity, and those poor human creatures...

They will never recover again.

We were only fighting out of self-defense. We had no other choice, but I can't help but feel a twinge of regret when I spy them trembling deliriously on the ground.

Stupid emotions.

That's what I get for falling in love and going soft.

"Come on, let's go. We have one more to find."

Madoc's eyes roll my way, and his pupils have shrunk to thin pinpricks. He's more animal than monster now. He slips his tongue out, a chilling smirk flashing across his face.

"You go on, brother. I will remain here and monitor the humans for... *fluctuations*..."

I have no idea what that's supposed to mean, but I grunt in reply, taking off on my wings through the castle.

I find the prick in no time. He saunters through the corridors so sure of himself, and he has no freaking idea of the true horrors that are in store for him.

It's time to find what he fears most.

Sweeping my misty tendrils toward him, I wrap them around his head, piercing into his mind, and the man halts, dropping the gun.

Well, what do you know? It appears this man truly does love himself. I can't find any insecurities or fears.

This man thinks he's utterly perfect.

That just makes me hate him even more.

It's all right, though. I will find something eventually. All these humans are the same. They're all weak, and I will exploit his fears in no time.

As I probe deeper and deeper into his psyche, I finally find what I'm looking for. It's a memory, and I almost laugh out loud. It turns out he wasn't always a good-looking son of a bitch. He was rather round as a kid, and other children teased him. Also, his mother abused him and ignored him his whole life, which would explain the unhealthy, toxic attitude that he has toward the opposite sex.

He hated Belle because she was the one woman he could never get, and it appeared she reminded him too much of his mother. Belle even resembled his mother, with similar brown locks, fair skin, and large dark eyes.

Pretty depressing, but I'm a monster, and I have to remain emotionally detached. This creature was prepared to kill me and my brothers, so I won't go easy on him.

Now I drag that memory of his mother to the surface until her face is all he can see, and now Gustave doesn't look so cocky and self-assured anymore. He wilts like a child, and he even sputters

at one point.

“Mommy, please... *love* me...”

Ah, shit. Why do I suddenly feel as if I have swallowed a giant cock made of lead? This is just too sad. Maybe if that bitch did love him, he wouldn’t have become such a garbage human today.

They say monsters aren’t born after all; they’re made.

Well, what does that say about me? I was born a monster who can exploit the fears of simple creatures.

The memory of his mother wrinkles her nose at him in disgust. Then she applies more lipstick to her lips before a mirror, and it appears she’s on her way out to get fucked by some low life.

She obviously doesn’t have time for her son.

The apartment is a shithole, and I almost want to go out and find her for ignoring her son.

Poor little Gustave.

She leaves the apartment, slamming the door behind her, and tiny Gustave cries for her return.

He’s alone. She didn’t even hire a babysitter. All she cares about is getting fucked.

Baby Gustave wails on the ground, and his cries are echoed by the adult, and it appears I’ve finally broken him.

The man drops to the ground and curls up into a ball, crying for a mother who never loved him. I hope she caught something off one of those clients and is now rotting in the dirt, but I have no time to dwell.

Eleven humans I have broken tonight, and for the first time in my miserable existence, it doesn’t sustain me. It makes me feel... hollow. Evil.

Maybe I am a monster after all

“Grey.”

I startle at the sound of a familiar voice, and turn, spying Belle at the other end of the hall. Leaves and branches stick to her hair, and how did she get past Madoc and all those other humans?

Did she climb in through that window just now?

“Belle...”

I step toward her, and I never thought I’d be so pleased to see her again. She came back to us, and now I can die happy.

“You bitch...” Gustave growls on the floor behind me, and I halt.

Belle peers down at him, and it appears she’s only just noticed him for the first time. Her eyes widen in fear, and she steps back.

I hear a gun click in place and my heart cleaves in two.

Fuck.

“I’ll teach you not to love me. I will *make* you *love* me. No one rejects Gustave. No one!”

A bullet fires, aiming for Belle, and I stretch my wing out to protect her. The bullet shoots straight through the membrane, ricocheting off a nearby wall, and I grunt in pain.

My wing is destroyed. My pride and joy.

It looks as if bullets can penetrate us after all.

Belle finally made us vulnerable.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## Belle

GUSTAVE READIES THE GUN once again, pointing it straight at my head, and I duck out the way, hiding behind a display stand.

Crap.

Gustave has lost his mind. I have no idea what Grey did to him, but now he's hell-bent on killing me.

He hasn't handled my rejection well at all.

"I'll kill you, bitch!"

He fires another bullet, and I just hope Grey is okay. He may as well be invisible now. Gustave only has eyes for me, and I have no choice anymore; I have to kill him.

I squeeze my eyes tight shut, tears slipping down my cheeks.

While I don't claim to have ever cared for the man, taking his life will not be easy. It will be in self-defense, but he is not only a danger to me but to my monsters too.

His bullet went straight through Grey's wing.

Something heavy knocks into Gustave, shoving him hard to the ground, and I hear the sounds of a struggle. I peer around the table.

Grey tackles the man to the ground, and all the shadows have left his body. Once again he resembles the gray-skinned man from the portrait, his bright green hair falling into his eyes as he pins Gustave's arms down.

There's a bullet hole in his wing, and his movements are turning sluggish.

Why is he losing his strength? The bullet only cut through a thin membrane of skin.

"Belle, go," Grey warns. "Let me take care of *this* one. Go and find Enzo and Nero."

Find Enzo and Nero? But I can't leave him. He's vulnerable, and he doesn't look right. He's still moving at a snail's pace, and his emerald eyes have lost some of their shine as they find me. "I said, go!"

Scrambling to my feet, I rush out from behind my hiding spot, gasping when I get a good look at the state that Grey is truly in.

He's really not himself. What has happened to him? He almost resembles a human in this weakened state, and he's no longer the ferocious monster that I have come to know.

Gustave, on the other hand, seems to be gaining strength the more he fights, and I have no idea what has come over him. Whatever Grey showed him appears to have driven him completely insane, and as a result, he's almost unstoppable.

"I said, go—!"

Grey is cut off next when Gustave plants a knee into his stomach, making the monster lose his grip. Now the human man climbs out from beneath his hulking body, yanking his gun up from the floor.

I expect him to shoot at me, but instead, he just sneers, and it appears he has finally come to his senses.

Well, just about. He still looks insane.

"Well, well. It looks as if monsters can be killed after all. And now you have to watch as they slowly die, Belle. Now you will know the pain that you put me through. If I can't have you, then no one can!"

I grit my teeth, regretting that I ever felt bad about shooting him. I will gladly put a hole in his pretty head.

"Y-yeah, Belle..." Grey gasps beside me. "Why didn't you just let him call you Mommy? All of this could have been avoided."

I pull a face at Grey, wondering what the hell he's talking about. "What?"

Grey sniggers, glaring up at Gustave again. "He wants you because you remind him of someone, and the pain of your rejection is all too much to bear."

Gustave growls, aiming the gun at Grey's face again. "Fuck letting you die slowly. I will—"

Before the gun blasts, a shadow flies up behind him, and I spy the crazed red eyes of Madoc looming in the darkness, his tendrils squirming like snakes.

He cackles like a maniac the further and further he delves into Gustave's mind with his misty appendages, and the man starts frothing at the mouth.

Madoc is making him go insane.

I don't think that is such a good idea. Gustave seems to come alive whenever the monsters attack him, and it's as if they're fueling him somehow.

There really is something not right with him.

Madoc steps back once he's finished with him, and now he watches as Gustave drops to his knees, gasping for breath.

Something lights inside his eyes as he gets a taste of Madoc's crazy, and I don't like where this is going.

His blue eyes glow ominously, and I think he is drawing power from them.

Madoc doubles over, and his shadows fade away as he finally becomes the flame-haired, red-skinned monster that I saw on the portrait.

"I... suddenly don't feel so... *insane* anymore. I... I think I'm... *normal*..."

Gustave cackles as he rises to his feet, fixing his menacing gaze on Madoc. "That's because you just passed on your insanity to me, you stupid monster. I am unstoppable now. I can't be killed!"

Before Gustave can shoot at Madoc, I grab my gun, shooting bullets into his back. He jerks with each movement, yet he never falls, and my worst fears come to light.

He *is* drawing power from my monsters, and how is that possible? He's a simple human.

Gustave jerks his head around, and a cartoonish grin spreads across his face when he sees me, and I've never seen anything so perverse.

He's fucking *terrifying*.

"Forget these deadbeats. I'm going to kill their leader, and once I'm through with him, I'll become king of this entire world!"

Gustave vanishes into a puff of smoke, and what have we done? We've created a monster, one more terrifying than any of mine have ever been.

We're totally screwed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# Nero

G UNFIRE ECHOES THROUGH THE castle, and I glance over at my elder brother. He stands before the bell jar, watching the rose as it wilts petal after petal. They're dropping at an even faster rate and a lump forms in my throat.

Were we too late after all?

"Brother... our brothers are fighting down there. We have to join them."

Enzo closes his eyes and those bright orange orbs that I rely so much on vanish into the shadows of his face.

"Soon, little brother. Soon..."

Another gunshot, and at this point I'm not sure soon *will* come. I know my brothers can fight off a bunch of humans, but I have a bad feeling in my gut.

I resist the urge to clean. Now is not the time to be fussing over frivolous things.

Something bad has happened, and it's on its way up to us as we hide inside the West Wing Tower like a pair of cowards.

I think Enzo was just too afraid to leave the rose exposed. It's our one-way ticket back to the Abyss, but I hardly doubt any humans would have made it up here.

Madoc and Grey will have everything under control.

Suddenly, the door to the room bangs open, and Enzo and I whirl around to stare at the hulking form of a monster.

I think it's a monster, but it looks a little human too. However, whatever humanity it had appears to be slipping away, and that's when I finally recognize the sorry creature.

It's Gustave. A human male who lives in the same village as Belle, the one who always pursued her.

And he's here to kill us.

My heart pounds, and all I can think about are Grey and Madoc. Where are they? How did they manage to let this prick get away?

They're monsters, and he's a human. There is no way he would have surpassed their strength.

Unless... he stole it from them.

I thought I recognized the crazy twitch of Gustave's neck, and his eyes... they almost resemble that of my insane brother. Yet instead of red, they're bright blue.

I've heard tales of humans like this. Instead of crumbling from our powers, they draw from them, stealing them, so to speak.

That's how dictators and war chiefs in the past were able to come to such power. They stole it from monsters, like us.

Fuck.

Humans are not meant to harbor such power. They truly are too weak to manage it, driven only by their own selfish desires. Combine that with the ferociousness of a creature from the Abyss, and, well...

You get this.

I've never seen one like Gustave before. Whereas all those other humans still maintained some humanity, this one appears to be losing his as the seconds tick by.

Humans are always the product of their upbringing, and I wonder what the hell got this one into such a state. Did some bitch never love him? Let me guess; it was the female parental figure. They call it a mother, right?

Humans are mammals. They need that love and protection from a mother figure, even into adulthood.

It sustains them and fuels their sense of self-worth, and if they never received it, they become a monster.

Well, that's one possible outcome. Not all humans are the same. They truly are complex.

"There you are..." Gustave breathes, stumbling into the room toward my brother, and as always, Enzo remains poised.

I, on the other hand, do not feel so confident. We can't attack him because he will only draw power from us, and we're way in over our heads.

“Hello, Gustave. It’s finally nice to meet you in person. You’re very popular back in your village. So much so that the whole town likes to sing songs about you. Do you really eat twelve dozen eggs every morning?”

A rattling sound echoes in Gustave’s chest, and now he staggers closer, aiming his gun at my brother.

I try to assure myself that bullets don’t kill us. But I’m not so sure anymore. Grey and Madoc were two of the most fierce monsters I know, and what in all of the Abyss has happened to them?

“Impressed, monster? Whatever it takes to beat you.”

Enzo sighs. “Yes. But it appears you don’t need *eggs* anymore. You have all the power in the world now. So go on. Shoot me.”

Gustave’s eyes widen in surprise, and he’s not the only one who's flabbergasted.

Has my brother gone insane?

This is madness.

We need to dispose of this human quickly.

A harrowing chuckle escapes Gustave's throat, and now he presses his finger down on the trigger. “As you wish, monster...”

Everything moves in slow motion once the gun goes off. I dive in front of my eldest brother, taking a bullet for him, and it goes straight through my incorporeal form.

After all, I am the only one who is still all shadow. Enzo has managed to win the heart of Belle, while I still have a way to go.

So it looks like I will have to be the one to fight Gustave.

Gustave shoots again and again, and each bullet goes through my form. I don’t even feel a sting, and it truly is a show of how hollow I am.

My brothers have fallen in love, and as a result, they have become weak. They say love makes you weak, but it also gives you strength, too. But it's not as if I'll ever know.

I stopped loving a long time ago. Back when someone broke my heart.

All she did was perish in the end. Humans don’t live as long as monsters, and it’s inevitable that they all die in the end.

While we monsters live forever.

Life is too cruel.

“Enzo, Nero!”



It takes a moment for the voice to register, but when it does, I finally feel as if I am flying on a cloud.

She... came back.

Belle.

It's been many years since I've felt this emotion.

Love.

Shit.

A bullet finally hits flesh, and now I stumble backwards, knocking into the bell jar.

“Nero!” Enzo cries.

It appears the bullet hit a vital organ because darkness is creeping into my peripheral vision, and is this what dying feels like?

It's... rather soothing.

The shadows consume me at last, and now the darkness calls to me like an old friend.

Finally, I'm home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## *Belle*

**I** DON'T MOVE A muscle as Nero collapses to the ground.

No. He can't be dying...

Enzo catches his fallen brother in his arms, and Nero fades further and further away as the seconds tick by. The shadows evaporate, revealing his true form at last, and I finally see the boyish face of the monster on the portrait.

Nero has become corporeal, and did he finally win my heart? Or did I win his?

Grey and Madoc rush to their brother's side, and now all four of my monsters cradle their dying brother in their arms, tears streaking down their monstrous faces.

They're monsters. Creatures that I was told were absolutely evil and felt no remorse or ounce of love. Yet here they are, mourning for their brother.

I shut my eyes, fighting off a sudden wave of grief. I splutter, wishing that I could turn back time and stop all this from happening. Nero is dying, and his brothers have no choice but to watch as he leaves this world.

Gustave won't stop at Nero. He will kill all of my monsters, and then when he has eradicated them from this land, he will finally have me all to himself.

Over my dead fucking body.

Gustave has to die. But I'm not so sure if he can be killed now. He has attained great power, and he's pretty much unstoppable.

I bare my teeth at the smug prick. "Go to hell."

His blue eyes flash, and then he aims the gun at my monsters, pointing the barrel straight at Enzo. I step in his way, and the man blinks at me dumbfounded.

Well, if he can still be called a man. I'm pretty sure he has horns now, and wings, and a tail, and a lizard's tongue.

Yet he will never compare to the might of my monsters.

“Don’t think I won’t shoot you too, Belle. After all, I don’t need you anymore. I have all the power in the world now. I don’t need a trophy wife. People will have no choice but to respect me, no matter what.”

“Respect? You're no longer human. One look at you, and everyone will run in fear.”

“Exactly,” Gustave sneers. “After all, with great power, comes great fear!”

No, with great power comes great responsibility. What an idiot.

I guess he is just a pretty face.

I square my shoulders, looking Gustave dead in his pretty blue eyes. “Fine. If you’re going to shoot me, then do it. I’m not afraid of death. If I have to die, then I would rather die protecting those I love.”

Yes, love.

I have fallen in love with these monsters, and I have no single regret.

Love may not conquer all as it does in fairy tales, but it has conquered me. That’s something Gustave will never have, hence why he has been driven to madness.

Power and fear are all he has.

Gustave roars, blasting the gun, and everything blurs to a halt. The bullet stops several inches away from my face like they do in the movies, and I stagger back.

What is happening?

Gustave’s face has frozen in a hideous snarl, his porcelain white teeth on full display, and has someone stopped time?

Quickly, I glance at my monsters, relieved to see that they have frozen too. Thank God. That means Nero still has time.

He won’t die just yet.

A bright light materializes in the room, and I squint, shielding my eyes. When I open them again, I look straight at an angel. Well, someone who resembles an angel. She’s nothing but a glowing silhouette as she hovers before me, and my lip shakes.

She’s the most beautiful-looking woman I have ever seen. Yet why do I get the inkling that it’s all an illusion? A cover-up to hide her true form.

“Young Belle... it appears you have done it. You finally managed to fall in love with all four kings.”

My eyes pop, and I whirl around to peer at the bell jar. The black rose has shed all its petals, leaving behind a bare stem, and my heart wilts.

Oh no. Was I too late?

I meet the woman's eyes, balling my hands into fists. So, *this* is the fabled enchantress. I never expected her to look so... pure. In my head, she has always been a vision of pure evil.

She banished my monsters to the human world, bringing nothing but darkness and despair. Yet she comes before me like a beacon of shining hope.

I'm pretty confused right now. Was she good or was she evil? Did she trick my monsters into thinking she was the spawn of the devil?

Who was right and who was wrong?

She smiles. "I never thought it would have worked. A human falling in love with four monsters? Your kind is terribly judgmental, Belle, yet you have given your heart to each monster."

I narrow my eyes. Hold on. Was this a test for me or for my monsters? I thought the reason she banished them was because they couldn't find it in their hearts to love her in her old, haggard form. And so as punishment, she sent them to the human world where they would seek the love of a woman, one who could look past their monstrous forms.

My mother always taught me to never judge a book by its cover, and if tonight's events have taught me anything, then it's that the real monsters are humans. My monsters only help to maintain the ugliness that humans create every day, keeping an eye on fluctuations. But over time, the ugliness has accumulated to the point where we can no longer see the light of day.

Maybe the darkness was a manifestation of humanity's evils all along.

Holy shit.

The enchantress brushes past me next and approaches my monsters. She takes one look at Nero, and just like that his wounds have healed.

Bullets drop from her palm, and how did she do that? Magic?

She sighs. "Guns. I should have known that the barbaric human male would have chosen such a deadly weapon." She glances up at Gustave. He's still frozen, his eyes glowing in frenzied glee, and there really was no hope for him.

He truly was an ugly by-product of humanity's evils, and it's a shame he can't be saved.

I'm not sure what will happen to him now.

Maybe the power will kill him eventually, but right now, he is too dangerous to let live.

He has to be destroyed.

"A pity," the enchantress sighs. "You humans all start off so pure, but in the end, you become a product of your own environment. This is for the best."

Gustave starts fading away, disintegrating into a pile of dust, and I shut my eyes, wondering what led him down this path. The enchantress says we all start off pure, unblemished, and maybe she's right.

Maybe Gustave could have been saved earlier on in his life, but it's too late now. You can't change the past.

While I don't claim to be a saint myself, I do try my best when it comes to doing the right thing.

The reason I agreed to come to the castle was in the hopes of saving my kind from the monsters, but it appears I am not done yet.

This had been my test all along. To prove that I had the heart to love four beasts, and to prove that there is some good left to humanity.

Just what happens now?

The enchantress looks at me, and her eyes seem to gaze straight into my soul. "There is darkness in you, Belle. You harbor a lot of bitterness for how things have turned out, but there's good in you too. You have a fighting spirit and a big heart. Truly commendable. You would do anything for the ones you love."

I would. I gave up my freedom so that my father could go free. But will that be enough to show the enchantress that humans can be saved?

What will it take to remove the darkness from the world?

"However, learning to fall in love with four monster kings was only your *first* test. You still have a long way to go."

I thought so, but the news is still no easier to digest.

"The kings will return to their kingdom, yet you will remain here. The Abyss is no place for humans, after all. If you thought your friend was horrific, then wait until you see what happens to humans who are unfortunate enough to find themselves stuck there."

This was the moment I had been dreading; I will be separated from my monsters. It's not that I didn't expect this news, but it still hurts all the same.

Well, at least light may return to the human world. That had been my goal right from the start.

Surely, the shadows will vanish once the monsters do, right?

Why do I get the feeling that won't be the case? It appears the shadows are here to stay. After all, they had nothing to do with my monsters.

The darkness had come from humanity all along.

Not only did I fail to save my own world, but I failed to find a solution where my monsters and I can live in peace.

But we're of two different worlds.

It was inevitable that we would be torn apart in the end.

Life really is unfair.

Finally, the world unfreezes, but when I turn, my monsters have gone.

As well as the enchantress.

I ball my fists. I never even got a chance to say goodbye.

I don't care what she says. I *will* see them again. And not only will I return to my monsters' sides, but I will save humanity from itself too.

Bring it on.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



## *Epilogue*

**M**ONTHS HAVE PASSED SINCE I parted ways with my monsters, and not a single speck of light has returned to the world.

It seems the enchantress had been right. The darkness had all been a result of humanity's failings, after all.

She told me that the Abyss was no place for humans, but unlucky for her, I've never been one for following rules.

It can't be much worse than what's left of the human world. I have to believe that there are better places out there, and I for one am going to seize my moment.

The car pulls up outside the old university where my father used to work. Grady drove the solar-powered car the whole way here, while my dad rode shotgun.

We can still use solar power. Even though we haven't seen the sun in years, we're still able to draw power from its life-giving source. The darkness was only an illusion after all. A trick of the mind. Although it may be psychological, it still appears to be real in some way.

It's definitely real for me and the billions of other humans who call this place home.

My father's old office was at this university, and this is the first time he has been back since the monsters took over and plunged everything into darkness.

He thinks he can get his inter-dimensional portal to start again, an invention of his. It had been top secret, and only a few VIPs knew of its existence.

My father obviously being one of them. He is a genius, after all, the smartest man I know. And if the monsters hadn't arrived five years ago, he may have even won a Nobel prize.

He dares to boldly go where no man has gone before, and the world needs men like my father in times of crisis.

I'm going to do it; I'm going to the Abyss. I will return to my monsters.

The enchantress gave me no direction or clue as to how I was to reform the human world. She just cruelly snatched my monsters away and left me hanging.

I know my monsters can help me. I just have to find them first.

We enter the abandoned university building, and it's still in pretty good condition. I remember hoping that I would one day attend this school, majoring in English Literature, but those dreams flushed down the toilet after the monsters came.

I most likely would have graduated this year, being twenty-two years old now.

The monsters took over when I was seventeen, at the start of my senior year of high school.

I didn't even get my diploma.

My father's old lab was in a subterranean part of the university, and it still recognizes his biosignature when he presses his eye to the retinal scanner outside the vaulted door.

When we enter the old laboratory, my eyes settle on the gateway immediately, and it looks like something straight out of Star Trek.

Father approaches a control panel, working some of the buttons, and the thing buzzes to life. Light appears between the arches of the gateway, and I step back, wondering if I really want to take this route.

Grady doesn't even step into the room. He stayed outside. Too afraid to come in. That's okay, though. We already said our goodbyes.

I can't believe I am doing this. I am going to travel to the Abyss. My father knows its exact coordinates.

The military had hired him to create the portal to the Abyss back when the monsters first arrived. They had hoped that they could use it as a weapon against them somehow.

But that reality never came to fruition.

They sent several humans through the gateway, and none of them ever returned. Yet my father has faith that I can.

I'm my mother's daughter after all, and he knows that I will be the one to save humanity.

I already know the four rulers of the Abyss. No harm will come to me when I'm in their realm, right?

I climb the stairs to the gateway, stopping before the blueish, thrumming light. I swing my rifle over my shoulder, wearing my lucky leather jacket. Don't forget my favorite blue ribbon too.

I may as well look nice while I'm saving the world. I just hope the gun will be enough to protect me.

“Ready, Belle?” my father says.

I glance his way, smiling. “Yes.”

He offers me an encouraging grin in return, and it's all the confidence I need. I can do this. Some may call him mad for sending his only daughter into uncharted territory, but this was all my idea.

I wanted to do this. No, I needed to do this.

It's time to see my monsters again.

Sucking in a deep breath, I bid my father a final farewell then step into the gateway at last.

*Enzo, Grey, Nero, Madoc. I'm coming.*

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Don't be shy... we don't bite. Well, Madoc might, but he's harmless...



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